



**Stylistic Direction: A performance based investigation of selected  
violoncello works of Pēteris Vasks**

by

Sophie Emily Radke

BMus (Hons)

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Music

School of Creative Arts – Conservatorium of Music

University of Tasmania

(May, 2017)

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## Abstract

This research project has been focussed on the development of a contextually informed performance practice for selected violoncello works by the Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks (b. 1946). The development of Vasks' unique compositional style for cello and his extension of the instrument's technical boundaries are explored. The research investigates the practical implications for performers and the technical and musical objectives that are specifically relevant to three key cello works: *Grāmata čellam*, Cello Concerto and *Klātbūtne*.

The research and the application of these discoveries in performance will be examined in four ways. There will be an exploration of the subject matter – thematic and inspirational – underlying Vasks' writing. Stylistic analysis will identify elements that are idiomatic to Vasks' compositions for cello. Vasks' stated opinions of his cultural background, political views and artistic influences will be observed in regard to the impact they have had upon the stylistic development of his cello compositions.

Ultimately, preparation for performance of these works is a key component of research methodology, through experimenting with technical and expressive solutions and reflecting on interpretations of these works by other cellists.

The findings of this research provide a stylistic paradigm by which cellists may form an effective interpretation of Vasks' works for the instrument, particularly in relation to the progressive stylistic and technical aspects inherent to the works.

## Acknowledgements

Special Thanks goes to:

My supervisors Dr Susan Collins and Dr Maria Grenfell

My cello teacher, the fabulous Sue-Ellen Paulsen

Associate Artists from my recitals: Caroline Almonte, Karen Smithies and the Jan Sedivka Camerata

And the residents of King Street

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Pēteris Vasks (b. 1946) is a significant and highly acclaimed living composer. His compositions are unique and have vastly contributed to the classical music scene of today. The Latvian lived through “the hell of Soviet occupation.”<sup>1</sup> He never joined the Communist Party and stood firm to his religious convictions, “never bending to write a piece of political hack work.”<sup>2</sup> “Undercurrent[s] of spiritual protest”<sup>3</sup> was more likely to infuse his compositions than political compliance. In fact, he suffered existential ruin, both prior to and as a result of the Iron Curtain’s fall, after which he firmly held onto his musical and ideological roots while many of his colleagues left to pursue careers in the West. His works are filled with pure emotion and love for his native country Latvia.

Vasks’ work was first brought to my attention when I attended a performance of *Grāmata čellam* performed by David Geringas at the Adelaide International Cello Festival in 2012. The sharp contrasts Vasks utilises in this work as well as his scoring of voice sparked my curiosity. At the time I did not know anything about Vasks and his compositions for cello or for any instrumental combination.

Vasks composed his first cello work Partita for violoncello and piano in 1974. Four years later came *Grāmata čellam* for solo cello. It was not until 1993 that he went on to compose his first cello concerto, and most recently in 2012 his second cello concerto *Klātbūtne* for cello and string orchestra. In addition, in the late 1980s, Vasks composed *Musique du Soir* for violoncello and organ, originally scored for hunting horn and organ. With cello works

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<sup>1</sup> Bradley Bambarger. “Composer Pēteris Vasks: The Art of Emotion.” *Billboard*, July 31, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Erich Welling. *A marriage of Philosophy and Music: A pianist’s view*. (London: Strategic Book Publishing, 2014), 207.

spanning almost four decades I wanted to discover how Vasks' style has developed over time. Does his treatment of the cello as a solo instrument mature? And are there continuous similarities between all his works?

The exegesis will be structured as follows: Chapter 2 will focus on Vasks' career development, outlining his compositional history prior to and surrounding his cello compositions. Vasks' cello works will be individually studied in separate chapters, highlighting features of musical style and character. There will be a discussion of the progress of his manipulation of the cello as a solo and accompanied instrument and the ways in which Vasks has been spearheading the progression of cello technique. Analysis of Vasks' demands on cello players treatment of cello technique will underpin the investigation. An exploration of the performances and recordings of the cellists David Geringas and Sol Gabetta, amongst others, will be included to illustrate this technical progression.

## **1.1 Literature review**

There has been minimal research undertaken on the works of Pēteris Vasks, in particular, his works for cello. The resources and material available on this topic are therefore limited. There is, however, an abundance of scores and recordings available, as all of Vasks' cello works have been performed, recorded and published. In this respect Vasks' publisher Schott Music<sup>4</sup> has a highly informative website which has been of great use in the current research. It supplies listings of all of Vasks' works categorised chronologically and by instrumentation. Schott supplies basic information on the works including dates,

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<sup>4</sup> "Schott Music – Pēteris Vasks." *Schott Music*. <http://www.schott-music.com/shop/persons/az/peteris-vasks> (accessed September 27, 2015).

premieres and performances. In addition, some compositions include a description written by the composer expressing his motivation and influences in composing the work. Schott's website also includes a brief biography of Vasks, sample scores and discographies by date of work and publication. This has all been of significant value supplying an overview of Vasks' oeuvre.

Vasks has a close affiliation with the world-renowned cellists David Geringas and Sol Gabetta. Cello Concerto (1993/94) is dedicated to Geringas and Vasks' second cello concerto, *Klātbūtne* (2012), to Sol Gabetta. Both works were premiered by the dedicatees. With such a bond between composer and performer it can be assumed that the performance and recording of these works by these cellists are closely accurate to the composer's intentions. Under the Conifer label, Geringas has recorded Vasks' first cello concerto with the Riga Philharmonic Orchestra.<sup>5</sup> He has additionally recorded under SWR Classic *Grāmata čellam* and Partita, amongst other works, with the album titled *Pēteris Vasks*.<sup>6</sup> Geringas has also released an earlier recording of *Grāmata čellam*, for the Es-Dur label, on an album titled *Solo for Tatjana*.<sup>7</sup> *Klātbūtne* was recorded and released for the first time during the course of this research by Sony Music with Gabetta performing with the Amsterdam Sinfonietta. Titled *Vasks: Presence*,<sup>8</sup> the album also features Gabetta performing *Grāmata čellam* and *Musique du Soir*. Both cellists having recorded *Grāmata čellam* reveal differing interpretations. Marko Ylönen has also recorded Cello Concerto<sup>9</sup> and various other cellists have now recorded *Grāmata čellam*. Live recordings of

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<sup>5</sup> David Geringas. *Vasks: Cello Concerto/String Symphony*. Recorded 1997. Conifer 51271. CD.

<sup>6</sup> David Geringas. *Pēteris Vasks: Grāmata čellam / Partita / Episodi e canto perpetuo*. Recorded 2008. SWR Classic 93229. CD.

<sup>7</sup> David Geringas. *Solo for Tatjana*. Recorded 1995/96. Es-Dur 2019. CD.

<sup>8</sup> Sol Gabetta. *Vasks: Presence*. Recorded 2015. Sony 88725435752. CD.

<sup>9</sup> Marko Ylönen. *Pēteris Vasks: Symphony no. 3 and Cello Concerto*. Recorded 2006. Ondine OODE 1086-5. CD.

*Klātbūtne* by Sol Gabetta,<sup>10</sup> Li-Wei Qin<sup>11</sup> and Marko Ylönen<sup>12</sup> have also been obtained for the purpose of this research.

CD liner notes often contain concise and vital information on composers and their works. Vasks' works are recorded and released more frequently today with the liner notes accompanying the disc therefore holding current information. The liner notes for the album *Presence* have been of significant value containing commentary by Gabetta and Vasks in interviews with Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer.<sup>13</sup> Both composer and soloist share their insight and feelings towards the works featured on the album. The liner notes by Peter T. Köster accompanying David Geringas' album, produced by SWR Classic,<sup>14</sup> are of particular interest including quotes by the composer on his treatment of the cello. An album titled *Pēteris Vasks: Plainscapes* also contains an informative interview in the liner notes with Vasks by Ināra Jakubone.<sup>15</sup> The release is not directly related to Vasks cello works; however, the content is still of significant importance with information on the composer's motive for writing various compositions. The liner notes by Christian Heindl for the album *Double Bass Fantasy*,<sup>16</sup> also not a cello focused album, were also highly valuable. The latter two albums mentioned were both released in 2012 making them both sources of recent information.

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<sup>10</sup> "P. Vasks – Klātbūtne ('Presence'), for Cello and String Orchestra (Live)." YouTube. Flash video file. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSA7pw11WqQ> (accessed August 26, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Li-Wei Qin. "Klātbūtne." Courtesy of the Adelaide International Cello Festival. Performed with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. Recorded 2014. Non-commercial CD.

<sup>12</sup> Marko Ylönen. "Klātbūtne." Courtesy of the Cello Cēsis Festival. Recorded 2015. Non-commercial CD.

<sup>13</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

<sup>14</sup> Peter T Köster. *Pēteris Vasks*. Translated by Miguel Carazo. (Stuttgart: SWR Classic, 2008) CD Liner Notes.

<sup>15</sup> Ināra Jakubone. *Pēteris Vasks: Plainscapes*. (Helsinki: Ondine, 2012) CD Liner Notes.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Heindl. *Double Bass Fantasy*. Translated by Ian Mansfield. (Vienna: Gremola Records, 2012) CD Liner Notes.

The scores for Vasks' cello compositions are the most valuable sources available. Schott Music has published *Grāmata čellam*,<sup>17</sup> Cello Concerto,<sup>18</sup> Partita<sup>19</sup> and *Klātbūtne*.<sup>20</sup> Alphonse Leduc alternatively published *Musique du Soir*.<sup>21</sup> Schott published *Klātbūtne* as recently as 2015. Before this concerto was publicly available a solo and orchestral score were obtained for the purpose of this research project.<sup>22</sup> It was interesting to be able to observe the minor changes made by the composer and soloist when the finalised scores were published. For a researching musician the opportunity to study and analyse the scores of these works is of great benefit not only for the purpose of performance practice but also for drawing comparisons between the works and the development of the composers writing for the instrument. Scores provide the opportunity for a theoretical and technical analysis. The orchestral scores for the concerti display how the orchestra supports the solo cello and reveal the broader harmonies and intentions of the composer. Critical reviews offer another significant and important source of information in relation to the impact new works have on audiences. Vasks, still an active composer, has his works premiered and recorded on a regular basis. As a result, critics are able to respond to, and document, how the public receives and perceives Vasks' compositions as they emerge, in addition to how individual performers interpret them. Of special interest is an article published in *The Sunday Telegraph* by Stephen Jackson titled "Out of Latvia on a snowball."<sup>23</sup> Whilst the title of the article does not allude to the work of Vasks, it speaks of the hardships he as a Latvian composer endured and the difficulties he faced getting his

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<sup>17</sup> Pēteris Vasks. *Grāmata čellam*. (Mainz: Schott Music, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Pēteris Vasks. *Cello Concerto*. (Mainz: Schott Music, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Pēteris Vasks. *Partita for violoncello and piano*. (Mainz: Schott Music, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Pēteris Vasks. *Cello Concerto no. 2: Klātbūtne (Presence)*. (Mainz: Schott Music, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Pēteris Vasks. *Musique du Soir*. (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Courtesy of the Adelaide International Cello Festival. Obtained 2015 prior to publication of work.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Jackson. "Out of Latvia on a snowball." *The Sunday Telegraph*, February 26, 1995.

music heard in the West. The article was published in 1995, not long after the first performances of his Cello Concerto, giving us an insight into how his music was received at the time.

Another article of interest is by music critic Bradley Bambarger for *Billboard* from July 1999 titled “Composer Pēteris Vasks: The Art of Emotion.”<sup>24</sup> Bambarger has contributed various articles to *Billboard*, reviewing Vasks’ works and recordings. He raises clear points about the motive and emotion that Vasks expresses in his writing, incorporating quotes from the composer in interviews. Through an array of various other critics’ reviews, specific words have now been linked to Vasks’ music, describing it as “spiritual,” “powerfully evocative” and “richly expressive.” All this provides a progression of how Vasks’ music has gradually become accepted over the past four decades and highlights his journey to becoming a respected composer of the twenty-first century.

The YouTube video titled *The violoncellist Sol Gabetta “A part of my soul”* published by the Euro Art Channel<sup>25</sup> includes a clip of Gabetta meeting with Vasks in preparation for the premiere of *Klātbūtne* and discussing the interpretation of the work. There is a brief conversation about the articulation of the main material in the second movement, which was very important in informing the interpretation for my own performance practice. An excerpt from the premiere with the Amsterdam Sinfonietta is also included as part of this video.

Historical books and writings on the nation of Latvia provide us with a better understanding of the circumstances that Vasks has endured throughout his life. Farrol

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<sup>24</sup> Bradley Bambarger. “Composer Pēteris Vasks: The Art of Emotion.” *Billboard*, July 31, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> EuroArtsChannel. “The violoncellist Sol Gabetta “A part of my soul.”” YouTube. Flash video file. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCdAVURmmlI> (accessed August 29, 2015).

Kahn's book, *Riga & its beaches*,<sup>26</sup> most recently updated and reprinted in 2004, contains a great deal of information on Latvia, despite its unusual title. There is much historical information leading up to the country's independence in 1990 and how events prior to this affected the Latvian people. One particular chapter details how the Soviet rulings affected composers, Vasks in particular, which will be highlighted in Chapter 2. There is also a brief summary about other Latvian composers, especially Vasks' predecessors and how the circumstances of the country affected their work.

All these sources have been valuable to varying degrees and have allowed for an informative biography to be pieced together of Vasks, his life and his works for cello.

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<sup>26</sup> Farrol Kahn. *Riga & its beaches*. (Ashbourne: Landmark Publishing Ltd, 2004).

## Chapter 2

### A Select Biography of Pēteris Vasks

Pēteris Vasks was the son of a well-known Baptist pastor. He was born in Aizpute, a small provincial town in western Latvia, on 16 April 1946. His first experience of music was the harmonium and the church choir, as his family did not own a television or a record player.<sup>27</sup> An early musical memory of Vasks' is hearing Mozart on the radio and there is almost always something of the composer's sublime adagio manner inherent in his work.<sup>28</sup> From a very young age Vasks learnt to play the violin and piano and began producing his first compositions. He began his music education at the local school of music in Aizpute and went on to study double bass at the Emīls Dārziņš Music School in Riga from 1959 to 1964.

Vasks recalled in an interview:

As a child I'd played duets with my sister and improvising at the piano was my secret passion, but I didn't dare tell anyone. My first song – aged nine – was based on children's tales. My earliest setting of Rainis, our major poet, came at 13. That time I was dutifully patriotic. At 18 I fell for *Lohengrin* and wrote half an opera.<sup>29</sup>

Vasks felt the effects of the repressions of Russian cultural doctrine during the Soviet Period. His religious beliefs and artistic principles did not allow his music to be politically influenced. Latvia became occupied by the Soviet Union during World War II in 1940. The

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<sup>27</sup> Peter T Köster. *Pēteris Vasks*. Translated by Miguel Carazo. (Stuttgart: SWR Classic, 2008) CD Liner Notes, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Bradley Bambarger. "Composer Pēteris Vasks: The Art of Emotion." *Billboard*. July 31, 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Jackson. "Out of Latvia on a snowball." *The Sunday Telegraph*, February 26, 1995.



country was then invaded and taken by Nazi Germany in 1941 – 1944. Following World War II, Latvia was occupied by the Soviet's once again until their independence in 1990.

Vasks, a pastor's son, was deemed by the Soviet officials to be "not loyal to convictions."<sup>30</sup> As a result of his religious beliefs, the Soviet authorities did not permit Vasks to study at the Latvian Music Academy in Riga. This was perhaps a blessing in disguise, as it enabled him to complete his degree on bass. He studied with Vytautas Sereika, at the Music Academy in Vilnius, in the neighbouring country of Lithuania. Vasks is the only Latvian composer of his generation to have been educated outside of his home country.<sup>31</sup>

As a bassist, Vasks' orchestral career began as early as 1961, holding positions in various orchestras from 1966 to 1974; including the Latvian Philharmonic Orchestra, the Lithuanian Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra and the Latvian Radio and Television Orchestra. After serving his one-year of compulsory military service in the Soviet Army he was finally granted the opportunity to study composition at the Latvian Music Academy in Riga.<sup>32</sup> He studied here from 1973 until 1978 in Valentin Utkin's class. Vasks was already largely self-taught from intense analysis and study of any and all scores he could obtain.<sup>33</sup> These consisted predominantly of Polish avant-garde music.

The post-World War II avant-garde movement led by Witold Lutosławski influenced Vasks' music extensively.<sup>34</sup> Vasks' music already showed great potential but was possibly enhanced more as a result of the close proximity to Poland in which he lived. Stephen Smoliar said that other European composers including Krzysztof Penderecki, Dmitri

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<sup>30</sup> Peter T Köster. *Pēteris Vasks*. Translated by Miguel Carazo. (Stuttgart: SWR Classic, 2008) CD Liner Notes, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Farrol Kahn. *Riga & its beaches*. (Ashbourne: Landmark Publishing Ltd, 2004), 134.

<sup>32</sup> "Schott Music - Pēteris Vasks." *Schott Music*. <http://www.schott-music.com/shop/persons/az/peteris-vasks> (accessed September 27, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Farrol Kahn. *Riga & its beaches*. (Ashbourne: Landmark Publishing Ltd, 2004), 134.

<sup>34</sup> Bradley Bambarger. "Composer Pēteris Vasks: The Art of Emotion." *Billboard*, July 31, 1999.

Shostakovich and Alfred Schnittke also influenced Vasks' works, along with American composer George Crumb.<sup>35</sup>

Vasks studied ancient music and classical drama as well as the compositional techniques utilised by twentieth-century works by Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern and Alban Berg.<sup>36</sup> Much of Vasks' early style owes credit to the aleatoric experiments of Lutosławski, Penderecki and Crumb.<sup>37</sup> Of great importance is "the combination of refined technique and powerful expressiveness in Lutosławski's music,"<sup>38</sup> which had a great impact on Vasks' writing. Lutosławski's aleatoric techniques along with the "aviary sounds of Messiaen [are] bound in with Vasks' own soulful cantabile style."<sup>39</sup> Vasks soon began to develop his own unique style, including aleatoric techniques, as well as traditional approaches with aesthetic roots in traditional Latvian folk music. The composer, "deeply rooted to nature and to the countryside of Latvia,"<sup>40</sup> includes imitations of Latvian folklore and birdsongs in his music. Particular compositions of his including *Musica dolorosa* (1984) and *Lauda* (1986) made Vasks the voice of the "oppressed people" of Latvia.<sup>41</sup> He achieved this by pointing out the positive aspects of the Soviet Period in Latvia as well as reflecting on twentieth-century conflicts.

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<sup>35</sup> Stephen Smoliar, "Two Seldom-heard String Quartets at the Conservatory." Examiner.com. April 20, 2011. <http://www.examiner.com/article/two-seldom-heard-string-quartets-at-the-conservatory> (accessed September 1, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Farrol Kahn. *Riga & its beaches*. (Ashbourne: Landmark Publishing Ltd, 2004), 127.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Bradley Bambarger. "Composer Pēteris Vasks: The Art of Emotion." *Billboard*. July 31, 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> David Denton. "Music of Latvia, February 1997." *The Strad*, February 1997. [http://www.music.lv/Composers/Vasks/The\\_Strad-feb97.htm](http://www.music.lv/Composers/Vasks/The_Strad-feb97.htm) (accessed December 1, 2015).

Vasks says:

Under the Soviets, concerts perhaps meant more here. People listened very closely to the undercurrent of spiritual protest in the music. This unified the musicians and the audience. Of course, you wouldn't want the Iron Curtain back. But in such an atmosphere music is very important to people.<sup>42</sup>

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Vasks attained an international reputation as a leading composer in the Baltic region.<sup>43</sup> The subject present in his music today is that of the "delicate relationship between humans and nature."<sup>44</sup> An additional message he includes is a warning of the danger of self-destruction and the world's efforts to create stability and harmony.<sup>45</sup> Vasks said, "I have often said that I do exactly the same thing my father did. He was a pastor, I am a composer – but the desire to say something about the spiritual dimension of humanity is common to both of us."<sup>46</sup>

Vasks wrote a large amount of chamber works in the seventies and eighties. During this time he discovered that the cello was his favourite instrument.<sup>47</sup> He formed a close relationship with the Lithuanian cellist David Geringas resulting in the dedication of his Cello Concerto to him.

Vasks went on to teach music in Salacgrīva, Zvejniekciems and Jelgava in the years after the completion of his studies. He has also been a composition teacher at the Emīls Dārziņš Music School in Riga since 1989.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Peter T Köster. *Pēteris Vasks*. Translated by Miguel Carazo. (Stuttgart: SWR Classic, 2008) CD Liner Notes, 6.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 6.

In 1996, Vasks was appointed the leading composer at the Stockholm New Music Festival. In the same year he was awarded the Herder Prize from the Alfred Toepfer Foundation and the Baltic Assembly Prize. Vasks was made an honorary member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences in 1994, and in 2001 became a member of the Royal Swedish Music Academy in Stockholm. He went on to become an honorary senator of the Latvian Cultural Academy in Riga in 2002. Vasks has also been the composer-in-residence at the Presteigne Festival of Music, in the Welsh Marches, and the Vale of Glamorgan Festival, in Wales.

Vasks has received various awards for his compositions. He received the Estonian honor of the Order of the White Star, third class, in 2005. He is a three-time recipient of the Latvian Great Music Award for his works *Litene* in 1993, *Distant Light* in 1998 and his second symphony in 2000. He also received the Cannes Classical Award for recordings of *Distant Light* and his second symphony.

Vasks has written music in almost all genres. Chamber and choral music dominate his output that consists of more than seventy works. He speaks of nature under threat and the need to defend humanity from forces hostile to mankind in the development of civilisation.<sup>48</sup> The presence of this ethical imperative creates a deeply meditative basic mood, as well as frequent sharp contrasts between the clear beauty of ideals and tragedy.<sup>49</sup>

Much of Vasks' music is "characterised by the juxtaposition of extremes: violent and ethereal, impetuous and reserved, strictly metered and largely improvisatory."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Bradley Bamarger. "Composer Pēteris Vasks: The Art of Emotion." *Billboard*, July 31, 1999.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Mike D. Brownell. "Pēteris Vasks." *All Music Review*. <http://www.allmusic.com/album/peteris-vasks-gramata-cellam-partita-episodi-e-canto-perpetuo-mw0001857165> (accessed June 26, 2016).

Vasks says, “I write music not for a mass of people but for an individual,”<sup>51</sup> noting that if many individuals are drawn to his distinctive music “then they are likely drawn to the truth of experience.”<sup>52</sup>

Vasks stands out among his contemporaries as an especially versatile composer. He incorporates elements of folk music and New Spirituality in his compositions.<sup>53</sup> His music is not always the most accessible, however, the observant listener is “always rewarded by the profundity of his expressiveness.”<sup>54</sup> The composer has “developed a highly organic and individual sonic signature, on in which even the darkest moments admit light.”<sup>55</sup> Melancholic narratives became the basis of his musical language with the composer incorporating different timbres and tunings to create hugely varied sounds that can now be heard in concert halls throughout the world.

The core of Vasks’ music is primarily defined by his experiences as a Latvian having lived most of his life under Soviet domination. He wrote: “Everyone of my compositions tells about the country which I love the most in the world – Latvia.”<sup>56</sup> Vasks’ approach to music is strongly influenced by his love of nature and ecological concerns for the world.<sup>57</sup> His apprehension regarding the damage to nature by excessive industrialisation, which may

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<sup>51</sup> Bradley Bambarger. “Composer Pēteris Vasks: The Art of Emotion.” *Billboard*, July 31, 1999.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> André de Quadros, ed. “Choral music and tradition in Europe and Israel.” *The Cambridge Companion to Choral Music*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 87.

<sup>54</sup> “Renaud Capucon Brings His Own Perspective to Pēteris Vasks’ Violin Concerto.” Examiner. Com. July 6, 2014. <http://www.examiner.com/article/renaud-capu-on-brings-his-own-perspective-to-peteris-vasks-violin-concerto> (accessed September 27, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Bradley Bambarger. “Composer Pēteris Vasks: The Art of Emotion.” *Billboard*, July 31, 1999.

<sup>56</sup> Ināra Jakubone. *Pēteris Vasks: Plainscapes*. (Helsinki: Ondine, 2012), CD Liner Notes.

<sup>57</sup> Stephen Smoliar, “Two Seldom-heard String Quartets at the Conservatory.” Examiner.com. April 20, 2011. <http://www.examiner.com/article/two-seldom-heard-string-quartets-at-the-conservatory> (accessed September 1, 2015).

be irreversible, is a theme highly present in his compositions evidently having an austere reflective view of the twentieth century.<sup>58</sup>

Vasks' wrote:

We live at a time when intolerance and hatred among people, nations, countries, and even religions, continue to rise. Ideals and traditional values are increasingly supplanted by the cult consumption. What is a composer to do at this time? In my opinion, you have a passion like never before the possibility of harmony, absence of ideals, faith and love of power to proclaim...I believe in the spiritual vertical, and will tell it in every musical work until my last breath.<sup>59</sup>

His eight works for string orchestra portray varying emotions such as joy (*Cantabile*, from 1979) and pain (*Musica dolorosa*, from 1983). Kriss Rusmanis, a British musician and television producer first heard Vasks' music at a Festival of Contemporary Music in Riga. Speaking about *Musica dolorosa*, he said:

I heard [Vasks'] *Musica dolorosa*, which commemorated both the death of his sister and what he saw as the political burial of his homeland. It was richly experimental yet accessible too; with a taut structure and a driving force which verged on sexual intensity. It became my ambition to get his music a hearing in the West.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> "Schott Music - Pēteris Vasks." *Schott Music*. <http://www.schott-music.com/shop/persons/az/peteris-vasks> (accessed September 27, 2015).

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Jackson. "Out of Latvia on a snowball." *The Sunday Telegraph*, February 26, 1995.

Vasks has composed three symphonies. His first symphony for strings, *Voices* (1991), in particular is strongly linked to Vasks' patriotism and his deep roots in the rich folk tradition of Latvia. Symbolically and historically it reflects Latvia's final steps to independence.<sup>61</sup> Vasks spoke of his country saying:

"Our tragic history has given us a terrific impulse to be creative. People from affluent countries have everything, but indifference flows from their music.

Our perception of life is very different."<sup>62</sup>

This melancholic first symphony takes listeners on a recurring voyage from "the timeless beauty of nature's voices emerging from silence to the heartrending cacophony of despair and back to the tranquillity of silence."<sup>63</sup> Vasks' subsequent symphonies, completed in 1999 and 2005, for full orchestra, are also said by the composer to be "reflections of recent political events in the Baltic States and their effects on man and the environment."<sup>64</sup>

The conductor Yakov Kreizberg is another figure with a close affiliation with Vasks. It was Kreizberg who encouraged the composer to break out of his small world of the chamber orchestra. Vasks proceeded to do this with his Second Symphony (1998/99), his first large-scale work. Kreizberg conducted the premiere at the 1999 BBC Proms at Royal Albert Hall in London. He described the composition and experience: "It was like a child who had few toys to play with being let loose in the toyshop."<sup>65</sup> Vasks' work, full of rich

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<sup>61</sup> Zoran Minderovic. "Pēteris Vasks Artistic Biography." *All Music*. <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/peteris-vasks-mn0001637630/biography> (accessed August 24, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Jackson. "Out of Latvia on a snowball." *The Sunday Telegraph*, February 26, 1995.

<sup>63</sup> Zoran Minderovic. "Pēteris Vasks Artistic Biography." *All Music*. <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/peteris-vasks-mn0001637630/biography> (accessed August 24, 2015).

<sup>64</sup> "Schott Music - Pēteris Vasks." *Schott Music*. <http://www.schott-music.com/shop/persons/az/peteris-vasks> (accessed December 2, 2017).

<sup>65</sup> Farrol Kahn. *Riga & its beaches*. (Ashbourne: Landmark Publishing Ltd, 2004), 134.

melodies and depth, had Kreizberg place him in the music constellation adamantly referring to compositions as “deeply Russian,”<sup>66</sup> with similarities to that of Shostakovich for example. Vasks’ Second Symphony could also be heard as very English with clear references to bird sounds and nature. Kreizberg said of the symphony: “The composer is committed to nature and deeply religious whether you believe in animism or God, and there are the brutal conflicts of the twentieth century reflected in it too.”<sup>67</sup>

Critics who discuss Vasks in the context of his Latvian inspiration and artistic debt to Lutosławski nevertheless acknowledge his originality, his characteristic soulfulness and melodic subtlety, as well as universality of expression that identifies Vasks as a major European composer.<sup>68</sup>

Vasks has composed five strings quartets, the fourth (2003) and fifth (2006) written for the Kronos Quartet. It is in his second string quartet (1984) in particular, that Vasks’ strong concerns about environmental issues are especially apparent, with the quartet containing a “sense of nature both pristine and destroyed.”<sup>69</sup> The composer has also written an array of various other chamber works for different instrumental combinations.

Vasks composed two solo works for double bass. These works include his solo bass Sonata (1986) and *Bass Trip* (2002/03), which both display Vasks’ vast knowledge of the instrument, as a reputable bassist. *Bass Trip* contains a large array of similarities and techniques used in *Grāmata čellam*, even though it was completed some 25 years later.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>68</sup> Zoran Minderovic. “Pēteris Vasks Artistic Biography.” *All Music*. <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/peteris-vasks-mn0001637630/biography> (accessed August 24, 2015).

<sup>69</sup> Arnolds Klotiņš. *Pēteris Vasks: Viatore*. (Riga: Wergo, 2007) CD Liner Notes.



In addition to the cello concerti, Vasks has composed three well-acclaimed concertos for violin and string orchestra. He had often thought about writing a large-scale work for violin, after completing his first cello concerto in 1994, and in the years prior to composing *Tala gaisma 'Distant Light'* (1996/97). His two subsequent violin concertos *Vientuļais eņģelis 'Lonely Angel'* (2006), a 'meditation' for violin and string orchestra, and *Vox Amoris 'The Voice of Love'* (2008/09), a 'fantasy' for violin and string orchestra are both regularly performed around the world.<sup>70</sup>

Vasks' abundance of choral works are also of major importance in his oeuvre with *Plainscapes* (2002) being inspired by the beauty of the Latvian landscape.

Most people today no longer possess beliefs, love and ideals. The spiritual dimension has been lost. My intention is to provide food for the soul and this is what I preach in my works.<sup>71</sup>

An additional work of interest is *Canto di forza* (2005), Vasks' composition for 12 cellos. The Berlin Philharmonic 12 Cellos commissioned the work, to be premiered at a cello festival in Frankfurt. It was premiered on 13 September 2005.

Today, many world-renowned musicians perform Vasks' works on the concert stages around the world. His works are extremely communicative, with a solid and muscular sense of harmony. Lyrical passages may be followed by agitated dissonances or interrupted by sombre sections with a march-like feel. He made extensive use of minimalist techniques; however, he never became attached to any particular method of

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<sup>70</sup> "Schott Music – Pēteris Vasks – Performances." *Schott Music* <https://en.schott-music.com/shop/autoren/peteris-vasks> (accessed May 3, 2017).

<sup>71</sup> "Schott Music – Pēteris Vasks." *Schott Music*. <http://www.schott-music.com/shop/persons/az/peteris-vasks> (accessed September 27, 2015).

composition. The composer's individual musical style will now be explored more closely in his cello works, beginning with his unaccompanied cello work *Grāmata čellam*.

## Chapter 3

### *Grāmata čellam* (1978)

*Grāmata čellam* is one of Vasks' most frequently played and recorded cello works. The title of the work translates to 'The Book.' The work was composed in 1978, soon after the composer completed his studies and was premiered in the following year by Maija Predele.

Vasks recalled:

It was great fun for me to write for solo instruments. A monologue, a single actor. You are alone with your musical idea, no orchestra, no piano, no electronic sounds. I simply make use of everything you can get out of the instrument.<sup>72</sup>

His description of the work in the front of the 2005 Schott publication, translated by Lindsay Chalmers-Gerbracht, states:

*Grāmata čellam* consists of two contrasting sections. The first, extremely vigorous section "fortissimo" (Allegro, free sonata form) works through raw and aggressive musical material in an unbroken state of tension, ultimately reaching a despairing climax. The second part "pianissimo" begins in a free, quasi-improvisational style giving way to an "Andante cantabile" with a long extensive melody over a pedal point. The movement culminates very softly in a reprise of the musical events as a reminiscence of its beginnings.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Peter T Köster. *Pēteris Vasks*. Translated by Miguel Carazo. (Stuttgart: SWR Classic, 2008) CD Liner Notes, 6-7.

<sup>73</sup> Pēteris Vasks. *Grāmata čellam*. Translated by Lindsay Chalmers-Gerbracht. (Mainz: Schott Music, 2005).

Signified by the enormity of nature and historical truths, Vasks describes to the listeners the dreadful contrast between humanistic ideals. The brusque dissonances, howling glissandi and insistently repeated notes of the first movement, *Fortissimo*, portray an array of negative elements including themes of violence and despair.<sup>74</sup> The subsequent movement, *Pianissimo*, outlines a positive counterpart. It is highly contrasting containing a calm free melody that emerges from a ghostly tremolo. The human voice accompanies the cello melody, which eventually becomes “lost in the depth of space.”<sup>75</sup>

Music critic, Bradley Bambarger, wrote of Vasks’ music: “No expression can ring true without incorporating its opposite – to recognize the light, you have to perceive the dark, and vice versa.”<sup>76</sup> *Grāmata čellam* portrays the reoccurring theme present in Vasks’ music of “life’s hopeful ideal as well as its often more tragic reality.”<sup>77</sup> The obvious contrasts in this two-movement work allow for an immediate impact and more staying power than so many strictly black or white sounds.<sup>78</sup> Vasks’ piece divulges shades of grey, nuances of emotion borne from a resolute conflation of heart and mind.<sup>79</sup>

Vasks creates his own personal sound world by drawing on unusual techniques to paint a sonic picture or narrative. He incorporates a large range of techniques in *Grāmata čellam* that are technically demanding of the performer. While many twentieth-century composers have broadened cello performance techniques, Vasks’ cello writing in this work is unlike any previous compositions in the cello repertoire. One should expect no similarities to any traditional stereotypes; rather, the textures and techniques in *Grāmata*

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<sup>74</sup> Peter T Köster. *Pēteris Vasks*. Translated by Miguel Carazo. (Stuttgart: SWR Classic, 2008) CD Liner Notes, 7.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>76</sup> Bradley Bambarger. “Composer Pēteris Vasks: The Art of Emotion.” *Billboard*. July 31, 1999.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

*čellam* should be enjoyed as idiomatic writing for the instrument and unique to the composer.

The work contains a large variety of extended techniques, which may be defined as unconventional, unorthodox and untraditional methods of playing the instrument in order to obtain unusual sounds and timbres.<sup>80</sup> Another unique technique that could be considered as 'extended' includes singing while playing the cello. There are also aleatoric passages where the cellist is left to determine the direction of the music and notes sounded, with the composer often only providing a starting point and vague indication of shape.

Of particular interest in this work is Vasks' scoring of the human voice in the second movement *Pianissimo*. This movement contains an additional stave with a melody line to be sung, or whistled, by the cellist. When the composer was asked about the inclusion of the wordless vocal line he explained:

An important factor in my music has always been spirituality and protest against power. I wrote mainly instrumental music, which did not come under KGB<sup>81</sup> control. They could control literature and cinema but they could not understand instrumental music!<sup>82</sup>

An early edition of the work contains a key on the opening page of the first movement of instructions to aid the performer with the interpretation of some of Vasks' written material and indications.

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<sup>80</sup> Christine Ammer. *The A to Z of Foreign Musical Terms*. (Boston: ECS Publishing, 1989).

<sup>81</sup> KGB: *Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti* – English translation 'Committee for State Security'

<sup>82</sup> Farrol Kahn. *Riga & its beaches*. (Ashbourne: Landmark Publishing Ltd, 2004), 131.



Figure 3.1: Key of Performance Instructions

In the 2005 Schott publication of *Grāmata čellam* the key has been refined in words:

- \*) Versetzungszeichen gelten nur für die unmittelbar folgende Note.  
Accidentals apply only to the notes they immediately precede.
- \*\*) Dauer der Pausen in Sekunden / duration of rests in seconds
- \*\*\*) langsames / slow glissando
- \*\*\*\*) Freie Auf- und Abwärtsbewegung über alle 4 Saiten.  
Freely determined ascending (descending) succession of notes on all four strings.

Figure 3.2: Key of Performance Instructions from 2005 Schott publication<sup>83</sup>

Similar instructions appear throughout the piece to guide the performer on the different techniques required. This includes a note on printed accidentals. None of Vasks' works use a key signature, as is common practice in atonal music, so the accidentals only apply to the notes that immediately follow and there is never a need to make use of naturals. Vasks indicates the length of fermatas between and during thematic material. He

<sup>83</sup> This and all other subsequent examples from *Grāmata čellam* are taken from: Pēteris Vasks. *Grāmata čellam*. (Mainz: Schott Music, 2005).

specifically writes lengths in seconds which ranges from one to four seconds. The composer also regularly indicates glissandi with a moving line coming from a note. Vasks directs the player to perform a slow glissando with the line indicating the direction and shape of how the note's pitch is to change, whether ascending or descending, and over how longer period. This is the opposite of a standard glissando, which is typically a direct slide from one pitch to another.

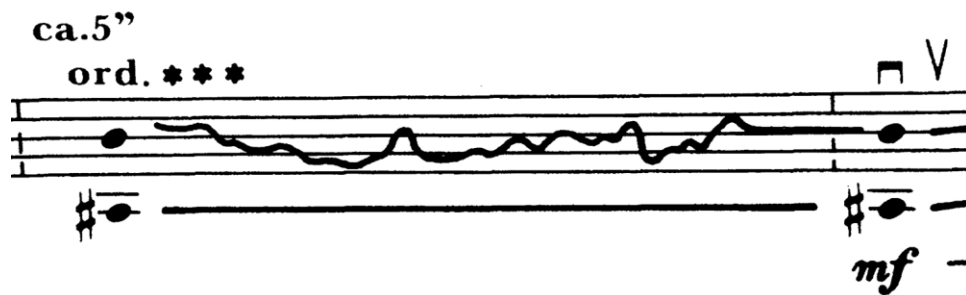


Figure 3.3: Slow glissando indicated in seconds

Throughout the first movement a second stave appears above the cello line. Vasks often notates chords as a starting point and leaves the rest up to the performer to interpret freely.

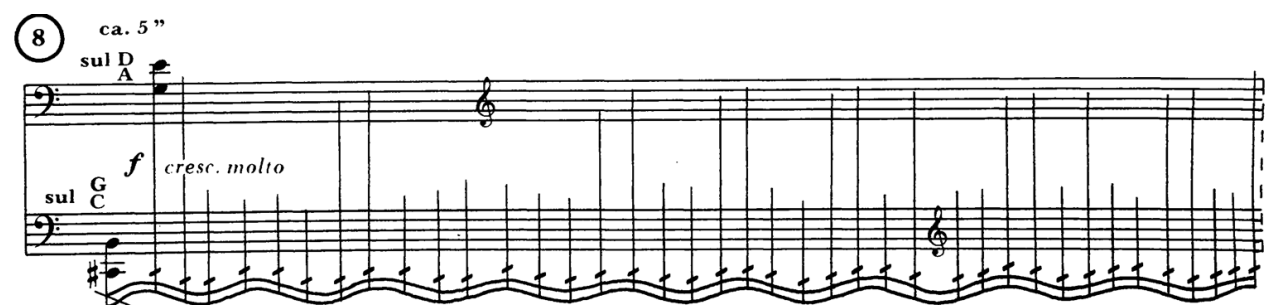


Figure 3.4: Two stave ascending passage

When this figure appears the performer is required to stop a note on every string indicated by sul A-D-G-C. With the direction indicated, the sound of two two-note chords

The first movement alone uses the full range of the cello's register. The fast pace, harsh intended volume and furiousness of the *Fortissimo* calls for strength, momentum and a high level of technical skill. Since Vasks' music does not contain much rhythmical connection to his thematic writing, it is unlikely that any two performances, even by the same performer, would be the same. This first movement contains odd unpredictable harmonic progressions and extensive passages of double stops that have little relation to the chord before and after.

**Marcatissimo** ♩ ca.152

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature (C). It features a series of eighth notes, some grouped in beams, and rests. A dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo) is placed below the first few notes. The bottom staff also starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp, showing a continuation of the melodic line with eighth notes.

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Vasks' development of this thematic idea only includes minimal variation. The rhythmic motif either has the addition of another note, creating double stops, or the composer changes the register:



Figure 3.6: *Fortissimo* – Developed motif

The main motif, owing to its primarily rhythmic nature, can be found throughout this opening movement and developed before recapitulating at the movement's conclusion.

A variation of this can also be heard in the lower register. It is marked down a dynamic, perhaps to provide an echo effect.



Figure 3.7: *Fortissimo* – Lowered motif

An extended technique that Vasks incorporates in this movement is the requirement of the performer to tap the strings with the left hand in a percussive manner. This is done without the use of the right hand, without the bow or pizzicato.



Figure 3.8: *Fortissimo* – Percussive tapping of left hand

It should be noted that in the Schott edition, the passage is to be played “with the fingers of the right hand.”<sup>84</sup> This is most likely a misprint, as it does not seem possible to perform this passage effectively with the right hand. A performance on YouTube by Janina Ruh serves as evidence supporting that this is a misprint.<sup>85</sup> It is also of interest that whilst Schott has published this passage in bass clef some cellists choose to perform it as if written in treble clef thus sounding D-D-E-D-E-F etc. Interestingly recordings by Geringas can be heard using each version. Geringas’ recording from 1995/96 of *Grāmata čellam* on his album *Solo for Tatjana*<sup>86</sup> is played in bass clef, whereas in a later recording in 2008 on the album *Pēteris Vasks*<sup>87</sup> the passage is performed in treble clef. When played in the printed bass clef version, on the C string, the passage is more audible and resonant, which is my preference.

Vasks often uses tremolo through double stopped passages. In passages of this manner the composer ultimately incorporates a variety of standard techniques: double stops, tremolo and glissandi. However, he has written for all three techniques to be used at the same time and therefore it could be deemed an extended technique.

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<sup>84</sup> Pēteris Vasks. *Grāmata čellam*. (Mainz: Schott Music, 2005), 10.

<sup>85</sup> Contrapunkt. “Janina Ruh – Vasks: Grāmata čellam.” YouTube. Flash video file. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9cLlNIkSHA> (Accessed May 11, 2017).

<sup>86</sup> David Geringas. *Solo for Tatjana*. Recorded 1995/96. Es-Dur 2019. CD.

<sup>87</sup> David Geringas. *Pēteris Vasks: Grāmata čellam / Partita / Episodi e canto perpetuo*. Recorded 2008. SWR Classic 93229. CD.

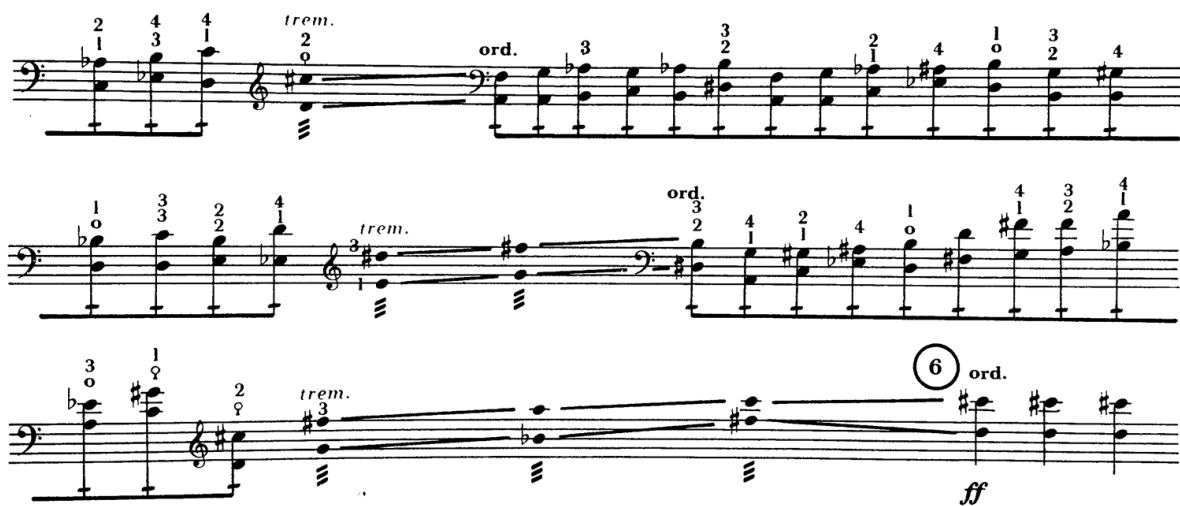


Figure 3.9: *Fortissimo* – Double stopped/tremolo/glissandi passage

As previously mentioned the second movement, *Pianissimo*, as the titles suggests, is highly contrasting to the first movement in every aspect. The movement emerges as a meditative lament with a trill-like figure. The figure begins measured and stopped before becoming a trill-gliss-harmonic effect that eventually ascends on the A string. This effect is again indicated with a line leaving the interpretation up to the performer, allowing for a lot of freedom in an improvising manner.



Figure 3.10: *Pianissimo* – Opening effect

While the only harmonic notated here is F#, a common practice in this quasi-bar is for the performer to go in search of additional harmonics, this occurring in the repeat. For example, David Geringas<sup>88</sup> and Sol Gabetta<sup>89</sup> both produce a harmonic melody, sounding F#-B-A-F#. Other cellists can be heard producing a variation of this but very rarely is this passage heard with F# being the sole produced harmonic. The harmonics can be achieved by moving the bow quite close to and then away from the bridge.

Vasks uses the open D string as a pedal while the melody is heard above on the A string in a treble register.



Figure 3.11: *Pianissimo* – Use of open D string as pedal note

In the *più mosso* sections the pedal note lowers to the open G string so that the moving material can be played on the D string. This also makes space for the voice to be introduced in a treble register so that all musical material is well balanced.



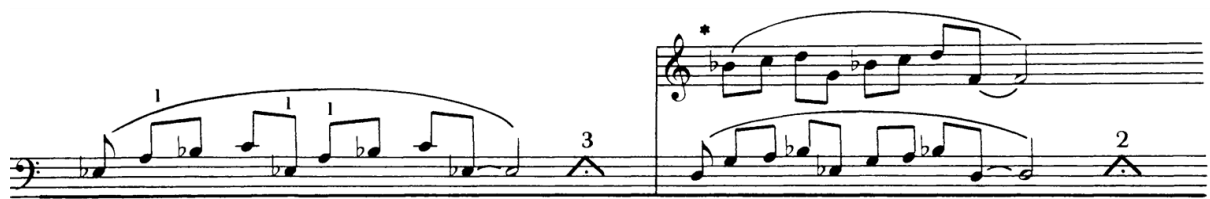
Figure 3.12: *Pianissimo* – Use of open G string as pedal note

<sup>88</sup> David Geringas. *Solo for Tatjana*. Recorded 1995/96. Es-Dur 2019. CD.

<sup>89</sup> Sol Gabetta. *Vasks: Presence*. Recorded 2015. Sony 88725435752. CD.

A challenge for the performer is maintaining a consistent and continuous sounding pedal note. It is also important here to balance the two registers. This can be executed with differing bow pressures on each string to make sure the moving line is most prominent.

The most notable technique in this work is Vasks' scoring of the vocal line. The vocal line is written a minor third above the moving cello line.



\*) Hier und in der entsprechenden Passage (12) pfeifen; Cellistinnen können hier singen.  
Whistle (here and in the corresponding passage (12)). Female players may sing these notes.

Figure 3.13: *Pianissimo* – Vocal line

Vasks indicates in the score that the treble line is to be whistled or that female players may sing it, assuming that the vocal line is in a more comfortable tessitura for women. The inclusion of the voice adds an additional timbre to the work and is said to be “radiating a special emotional depth.”<sup>90</sup> Vasks does not include any suggestion of what sound should be sung through this passage, however, most performers choose to use the vowel sound ‘ahh.’ It should also be noted that David Geringas can very accurately sing this passage falsetto.

*Grāmata čellam* is Vasks' most frequently performed cello work. Cellists including David Geringas, Sol Gabetta, Kristine Blaumane, Lei-Wi Qin and many more have performed it around the world. Only a small handful of cellists have recorded the work however including Geringas and Gabetta. Gabetta recorded the piece in 2009, releasing it in 2010

<sup>90</sup> Sol Gabetta. *Presence*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

as a single for Sony Music.<sup>91</sup> This particular recording also appears on Gabetta's *Vasks: Presence* album released by Sony Music in 2015.<sup>92</sup> Gabetta also regularly uses the second movement *Pianissimo* as an encore following concerto performances.

As previously mentioned, Geringas has twice recorded and released *Grāmata čellam*. His interpretation of the work is quite in contrast to that of Gabetta's. Differences can be found particularly in sections where Vasks leaves the interpretation up to the performer. This includes how trills are executed, how 'wavy' the written line is interpreted, how the harmonics are produced in the opening of *Pianissimo*, and of course the execution of the vocal passage. These details of performance practice are highly relevant, interesting and are of great importance when interpreting the work.

Perhaps with the *Pianissimo* being more accessible to listeners, it has also been recorded by other artists without *Fortissimo*, including Martina Trost<sup>93</sup> and Marta Bagratuni<sup>94</sup> and appears on their compilation albums.

After composing *Grāmata čellam*, it took Vasks almost three decades to write another work for the cello.

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<sup>91</sup> Sol Gabetta. *Pēteris Vasks: Grāmata čellam*. Recorded 2010. RCA Red Seal 88697675232. CD.

<sup>92</sup> Sol Gabetta. *Vasks: Presence*. Recorded 2015. Sony 88725423122. CD.

<sup>93</sup> Martina Trost. *Mas Que....* Recorded 2016. Finetone 8039. CD.

<sup>94</sup> Marta Bagratuni. *Pieces of the World*. Recorded 2013. Blue Griffin. CD.

## Chapter 4

### Cello Concerto (1993/94)

“Vasks resisted politics with every fiber of his being.”<sup>95</sup> In reference to his first Cello Concerto, composed in 1993/94 and dedicated to the Lithuanian cellist David Geringas, Vasks made a robust declaration about his position:

I wanted to tell in music of the persistence of a personality against crude brutal power. About sources of strength which helped us to endure it all. What totalitarian power did to us. How we are to purge ourselves from the manipulation. Above all, how we are to carry on with our lives.<sup>96</sup>

Vasks began the concerto three years after Latvia finally gained independence in 1990. It symbolically and historically reflects Vasks’ patriotism and his deep roots in the rich folk traditions of Latvia. This is also especially apparent in his first symphony for strings, *Voices* (1991).

As with much of Vasks’ work, the cello concerto is engulfed with extreme contrasts ranging from “coiled tension to singing grace and back again.”<sup>97</sup> It was premiered on November 26, 1994, in Berlin by David Geringas with the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester, conducted by Arturo Tamayo. Geringas gave a second performance of the concerto in Germany in February 1995 with the Kiel Philharmonic Orchestra. On this occasion Vasks “got a taste of how hard it can be to win international acclaim. His Cello Concerto was booed.”

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<sup>95</sup> Farrol Kahn. *Riga & its beaches*. (Ashbourne: Landmark Publishing Ltd, 2004), 131.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>97</sup> Bradley Bambarger. “Peteris Vasks: Cello Concerto, String Symphony.” *Billboard*, May 31, 1997.

Kriss Rusmanis, a British musician and television producer at the time, recalled the poorly received performance of the concerto:

Its openness was resented by an avant-garde clique in the audience and the orchestra hadn't rehearsed properly. Pēteris stood on stage with David Geringas, the soloist, and took four bows. After two bows the orchestra deserted them but Geringas, determined to play more Vasks, shoved his way through.<sup>98</sup>

Geringas followed the concerto with the second movement, *Pianissimo*, from *Grāmata čellam*. His performance "brought the house down, and what began as a disaster became an emotional experience for everyone there."<sup>99</sup>

The five-movement work has a symmetrical structure with a sequence of strongly contrasting episodes. Vasks structures the concerto as follows: Cantus I – Toccata I – Monologhi – Toccata II – Cantus II.

As a powerful constructive principle, Béla Bartók often employed symmetry or 'arch' structure.<sup>100</sup> Bartók employed this structure in his five-movement works, which include his 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> string quartets.

Of this formation Bartók said:

The slow movement is the kernel of the work; the outer movements are, as it were, arranged in layers around it. Movement IV is a free variation of II, and V and I have the same thematic material; that is around the kernel (Movement

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<sup>98</sup> Stephen Jackson. "Out of Latvia on a snowball." *The Sunday Telegraph*, February 26, 1995.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> László Somfai. *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 1996), 19.



III), metaphorically speaking, I and V are the outer, II and IV the inner layers.<sup>101</sup>

Bartók sketched out the five-movement overall plan in the form description of his 4<sup>th</sup> String Quartet:

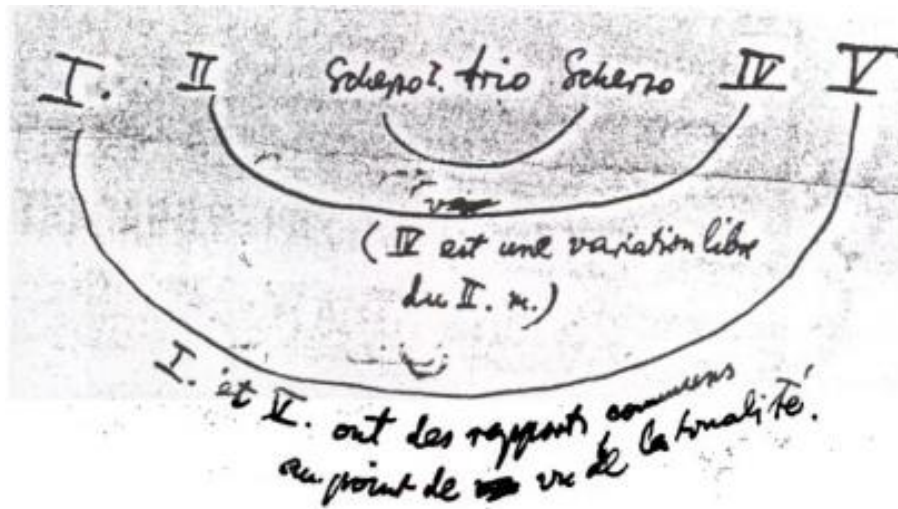


Figure 4.1: Sketch by Béla Bartók of the symmetrical 5-movement form of his Fourth String Quartet<sup>102</sup>

Vasks went on to employ a similar structure in his first violin concerto *Distant Light* (1997).

All movements in this cello concerto are *attacca*, creating a continuous single-movement appearance. The first movement, Cantus I, opens the work with a quiet nostalgic tutti creating an atmosphere highly reminiscent of Henryk Górecki's compositions, a contemporary Polish composer. The solo cello comes in singing a melancholic call with this movement serving as an introduction for a long story beginning to be told. Vasks

<sup>101</sup> Benjamin Suchoff, ed. *Béla Bartók Essays*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 412.

<sup>102</sup> László Somfai. *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 1996), 20.

introduces a motif here consisting of three-notes repeated. This can be heard throughout movements I and V. It is also briefly mentioned in the third movement monologue.



Figure 4.2: Cantus I – Opening solo cello melody introducing three-note motif<sup>103</sup>

Vasks uses this motif again in the development of the first movement. This motif always appears at the start of a section, with the musical phrase that grows out of it developing and expanding with each statement. The music here tells of emotions of tragedy and longing for survival, the story of the suffering Latvian people and the hardships they endured under the Soviet regime. The composer portrays all this with his highly expressive and cantabile writing style in the solo cello line, with brief climaxes signifying hope.

<sup>103</sup> This and all other subsequent examples from Cello Concerto are taken from: Pēteris Vasks. *Cello Concerto*. (Mainz: Schott Music, 1996).

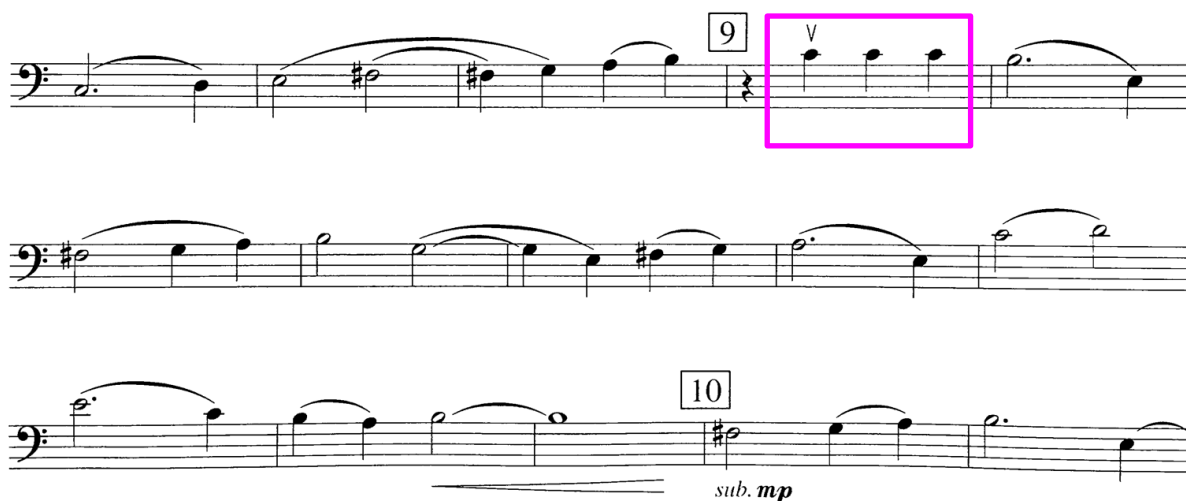


Figure 4.3: Cantus I – Development

The developed motif from Cantus I appears again almost identically in the fifth movement, Cantus II. On this occasion it is a fourth higher.

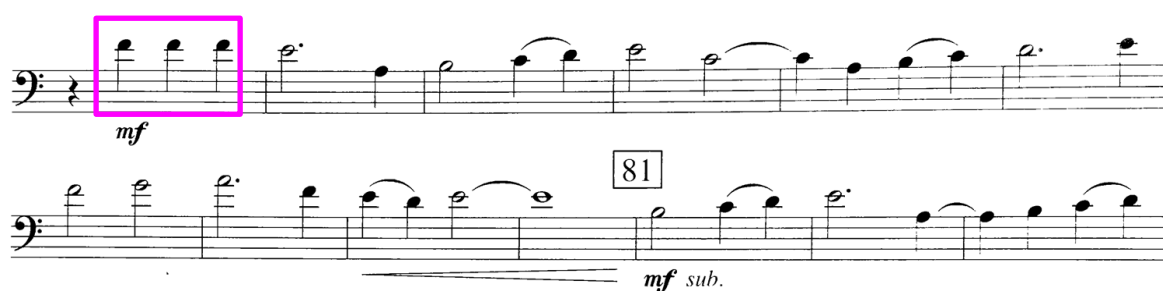


Figure 4.4: Cantus II – Return of the three-note motif

The second movement, Toccata I, is highly contrasting as the tempo quickens becoming restless and desperate. The movement is very repetitive with the cello playing running semiquavers throughout.

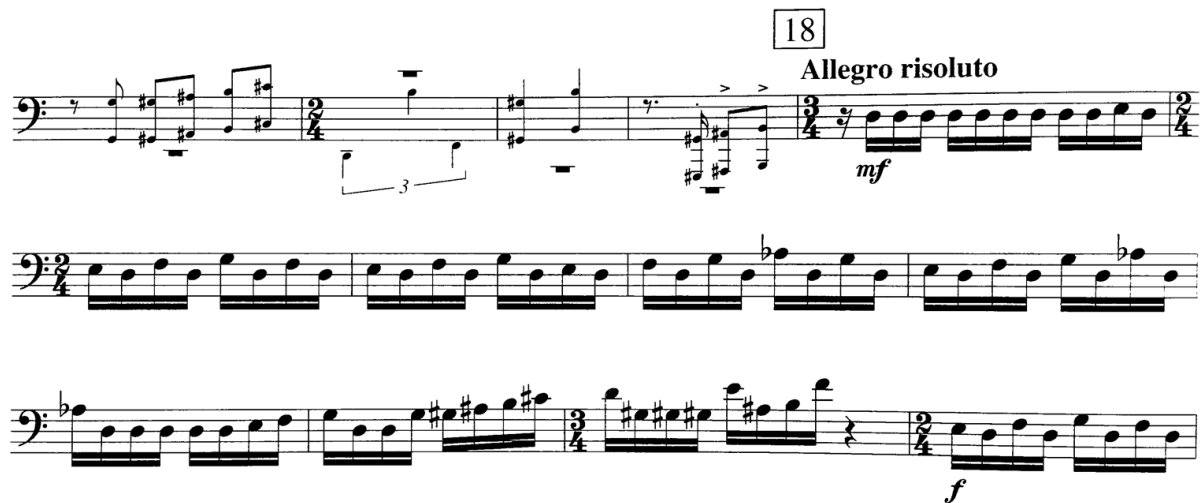


Figure 4.5: Toccata I – Opening solo cello theme

This theme is revisited in the fourth movement almost identically and developed upon leading now into a cadenza.



Figure 4.6: Toccata II – Opening solo cello theme from Toccata I reintroduced

Toccata II is even more restless and furious than the first, developing to recapitulate the theme with more passion and containing another extended solo cadenza. The movement then modulates into the works central movement, the 'kernel.' The solo cello is prominent here as it struggles, almost to speak, in the two extensive cadenzas. It serves as a recitative often making use of pedal notes and hymnody passages.

Toccata II concludes with a loud, dissonant chord in the orchestra, which disappears suddenly as Cantus II begins, taking us back to the sad lyrical beauty of the concerto's opening. The solo cello emerges from this abrupt chord as a beautiful single voice. Unlike the opening Cantus that moves towards the restless Toccata, the music here builds to an uplifting and highly patriotic sounding *Maestoso*, which is only heard very briefly in the first Cantus in the orchestra. This is the climax of the work appearing in a somewhat colloquial manner, reminiscent of a folk melody or anthem with its simple rhythm and use of a limited range in register. This perhaps serves as a metaphor for the triumph of Latvia becoming an independent nation.

The work concludes by revisiting the cantabile of the first movement. In its entirety it concludes in stillness, mysteriously ascending to an unknown place. The solo cello here plays artificial harmonics, which helps create an enigmatic atmosphere. The toll of a bell can also be heard, like a funeral toll that perhaps is a reference to mark the end of Latvia's long journey under Soviet occupation.

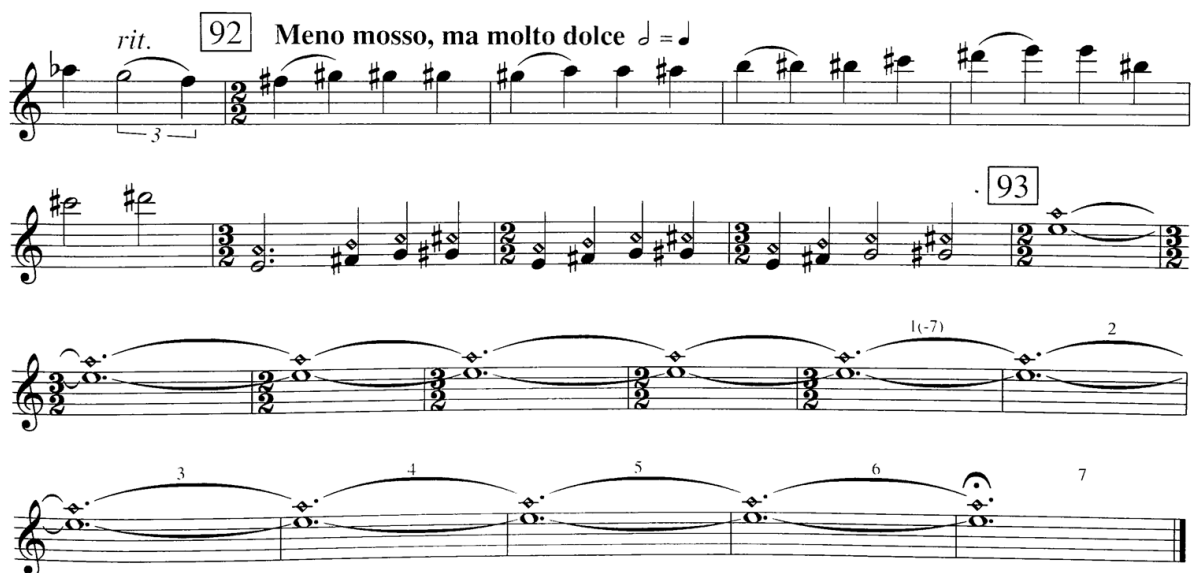


Figure 4.7: Cantus II – Conclusion of concerto

Of particular interest throughout the work are its similarities to that of Shostakovich's writing. Vasks' orchestral writing in the quick Toccata movements has an uncanny resemblance to that of Shostakovich's first cello concerto. In the first movement of Shostakovich's cello concerto, from rehearsal figure 9, he writes a tutti passage, which leads into an accompaniment. Vasks uses an almost identical passage in the Toccatas of his cello concerto, which can be first heard at rehearsal figure 26. Vasks' writing is more heavily orchestrated, however both passages display similar rhythmic elements as well as notation. This could perhaps be an unconscious result of both composers being similarly affected by the Communist regime, with Shostakovich spending most of his career falling in and out of favour with the Soviet authorities.

Shostakovich composed his cello concerto over three decades earlier in 1959. It serves as an example of the sort of music with which he occupied himself between the death of Joseph Stalin and his renewed aesthetic and political confidence of the 1960s. It is highly possible that Vasks drew influence from this concerto when composing his own.

The most notable recordings of Vasks' concerto are those of David Geringas and Marko Ylonen. Conifer Records<sup>104</sup> released the first recording of the work in 1996 with Geringas performing with the Riga Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Jonas Aleksa. Ondine<sup>105</sup> released Ylonen's recording in 2006 with him performing with Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by John Storgards. Compared to *Grāmata čellam* these two recordings are more unified, with the work not allowing for as much free interpretation. The only opportunity for real freedom from the performer is in the three cadenzas.

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<sup>104</sup> David Geringas. *Vasks: Cello Concerto/String Symphony*. Recorded 1997. Conifer 51271. CD.

<sup>105</sup> Marko Ylönen. *Pēteris Vasks: Symphony No. 3 and Cello Concerto*. Recorded 2006. Ondine OODE 1086-5. CD.

Many other cellists including Steven Isserlis, Denis Shapovalov and Jens Peter Maintz have also performed this cello concerto around the world.

It becomes noticeable how over time the subject matter of the Vasks' work has altered.

The predominant mood present in his music today is more introspective. He speaks of the delicate relationship between humans and nature. This is ever present in his second cello concerto, which he composed almost two decades later.

## Chapter 5

### Cello Concerto No. 2: *Klātbūtne* (2012)

Vasks composed *Klātbūtne*, his second cello concerto for violoncello and string orchestra in 2012. The work follows Vasks' long line of programmatic titles in Latvian: *Klātbūtne* meaning 'Presence.' Vasks' explanation of the title is: "I am here. I am not distant. With every breath I am here in this world, with all my ideals and all my dreams of a better world."<sup>106</sup> The composer portrays his ideas in this work by creating a series of cantilenas, forming multiple flowing melodies that serve as different chapters of life.

Argentinian cellist Sol Gabetta asked Vasks to compose this cello concerto for her. Gabetta was enthralled after she heard *Grāmata čellam* for the first time, with Vasks' scoring requiring the cellist to sing while playing. She wanted to become better acquainted with the composer and so invited him to her festival – the SOLsberg Festival.

Gabetta said of their first encounter:

At our first meeting I felt at once that we would understand one another. He is someone with a great deal of depth to him and at the same time is a powerful personality. Pēteris is a generous person and yet he is also very decisive. He knows exactly how he wants a particular passage to be played and why he wrote it as he did – and why he didn't.<sup>107</sup>

Having already written a cello concerto, Vasks initially felt he was not yet ready to write another when approached by Gabetta. She was very determined to change his mind

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<sup>106</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

<sup>107</sup> Sol Gabetta. *Presence*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.



however and after subsequent encounters finally the composer was “gripped by the creative urge”<sup>108</sup> to compose a second cello concerto. The Amsterdam Sinfonietta, Amsterdam Cello Biennale, the Eduard van Beinum Foundation and the International Istanbul Music Festival co-commissioned the work.

*Klātbūtne* is Vasks’ first work for the combination of violoncello and string orchestra, despite previously having written three works for violin and string orchestra. Gabetta performed the premiere on October 25, 2012, with the Amsterdam Sinfonietta. The premiere took place at the music centre De Bijloke in Ghent, Belgium. Following the premiere Gabetta and the Amsterdam Sinfonietta gave subsequent performances throughout Europe. Gabetta, along with a handful of other cellists, have since performed *Klātbūtne* around the world. Other notable early performances of the work include Li-Wei Qin’s performance with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, as part of the 2014 Adelaide International Cello Festival, and Marko Ylönen’s performance with the Sinfonietta Riga at the Cello Cēsis Festival in 2015. Both cellists have since given subsequent performances also.

The Gabetta and Vasks close working relationship allowed the composer’s intended interpretation to be ever present. The cellist and composer worked closely to produce the first recording of the work, which was released in November 2015. Of this recording reviewer David Smith wrote:

The cello writing suggests an intuitive grasp of the instrument. We surely have the friendship between Vasks and Gabetta to thank for this – she evidently knows how to put across his music exactly the way he intends, and

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<sup>108</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

equally he clearly understands how to draw the best out of her with his writing.<sup>109</sup>

Vasks uses the cello, in this three-movement work, to convey his own view on life: “You arrive on this earth as a human being, you take your first steps in the world and then your life slowly develops.”<sup>110</sup> The atmosphere of the concerto presents the idea of “the soul ascending into the cosmos.”<sup>111</sup> The work opens with the first cadenza followed by the first movement – *Andante cantabile*. The cadenza begins with a *pianississimo-col legno* C string motif. It grows from *col legno* to *pizzicato* and then *arco* allowing for the timbre and dynamic to increase gradually. This depicts Vasks’ concept of one taking their “first steps in the world.”<sup>112</sup> The opening also has measured fermatas, similarly to *Grāmata čellam*, creating space, which gradually decreases.

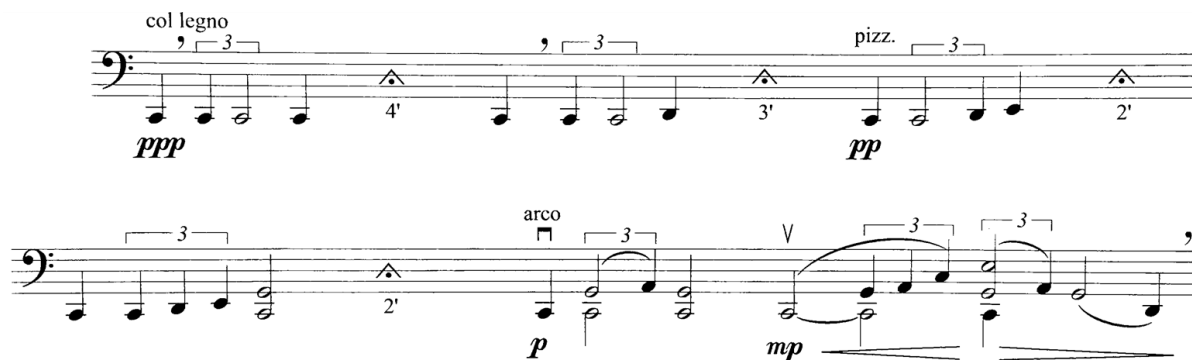


Figure 5.1: Cadenza I – Opening of concerto<sup>113</sup>

This movement is the first canto; the first significant event in the long story that is taking place. It is reminiscent of a hymn, interpreted thus: “You set foot in the world with a task

<sup>109</sup> David Smith. “Vasks: Presence.” Presto Classical.

<http://www.prestoclassical.co.uk/r/Sony/88725423122> (accessed December 17, 2015).

<sup>110</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> This and all other subsequent examples from *Klātbūtne* are taken from: Pēteris Vasks. *Cello Concerto no. 2: Klātbūtne (Presence)*. (Mainz: Schott Music, 2015).

to perform, your aim being to bring more love and more idealism to the world.”<sup>114</sup> Vasks develops this idea throughout the first movement suggesting the development of life.

The second movement, *Allegro marcato*, is highly contrasting; the black against white. The majority of Vasks’ multi-movement works contain a strong contrast between movements, with the composer often employing the formal structure of slow – fast – slow. This movement is quick and aggressive, and fuelled by “negative ideas,”<sup>115</sup> through harsh dissonant passages. Vasks, however, intends all his cantos to contain the same theme: “what do I want to achieve on this earth? In which direction should I take my life?”<sup>116</sup> This contrasting movement contains tutti passages of irony and sarcasm, once again very reminiscent of Shostakovich’s writing. In particular, Shostakovich uses *Suliko*; a Georgian song well known throughout the Soviet Union and favoured by Joseph Stalin, in the fourth movement of his Cello Concerto No.1 (1959), as a satire on the Soviet regime. Vasks does not disguise and distort a pre-existing tune, like Shostakovich; he does, however, use a form of satire and irony in his writing. This, as previously mentioned, is still perhaps as a result of having lived through similar hardships inflicted upon him by the Soviets.

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<sup>114</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

**Allegro marcato**

Figure 5.2 shows the opening theme of the first movement, measures 1 to 31. The tempo is **Allegro marcato**. The music is in bass clef, 2/4 time, and features a key signature of one flat. The score includes dynamic markings (*mp*, *mf*, *f*, *ff*), articulation (accents, staccato), and phrasing slurs. Measure numbers 7, 14, 20, and 26 are indicated. A first ending bracket labeled "1" spans measures 10-13, and a second ending bracket labeled "2" spans measures 18-21. The tempo "Allegro marcato" is written at the top.

Figure 5.2: mm. 1 – 31. *Allegro marcato*, opening theme

Vasks' violent and sarcastic theme, in this movement, is broken twice by an *Andante*.

These passages, in the slower tempo, seem to be forgotten verses from the hymn of the opening movement.

Figure 5.3 shows the first *Andante* hymnal passage, measures 135 to 141. The tempo is **Andante**. The music is in treble clef, 3/4 time, and features a key signature of one flat. The score includes dynamic markings (*mp*, *mf*), articulation (accents, staccato), and phrasing slurs. Measure numbers 127 and 135 are indicated. A first ending bracket labeled "11" spans measures 135-138, and a second ending bracket labeled "12" spans measures 140-141. The tempo "Andante" is written above the staff.

Figure 5.3: mm. 135 – 141. First *Andante* hymnal passage

The second cadenza of the work appears in the middle of this movement; a monologue with the cello leading the way, placing the orchestra as second.<sup>117</sup>



Figure 5.4: Cadenza II – Opening motif

The cadenza allows for the solo cello to recount an array of things that would not be able to be said otherwise with the orchestral accompaniment. The movement eventually concludes with a chord marked *fortissississimo* from the string orchestra sounding like a powerful scream.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>117</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.



Figure 5.5: mm. 389 – 399. *Fortissississimo* ‘Scream’ Chord

The final movement, a slow *Adagio*, contains perhaps the most significant passage in the work, a lullaby that incorporates the human voice. A recurring theme in Vasks’ work is the tragedies of life and the conflict between nations and individuals. It is, however, present in this movement, serving as a key example, that Vasks’ love, idealism and passion for life can still always be heard in his slow movements with his luscious, *legato* melodies. These melodies when played on the D string can contain additional warmth, which is appropriate; opposed to the brightness the A string often produces. In this movement Vasks was “inspired to conjure up the idea of the soul returning to earth and starting a

new life.”<sup>119</sup> He portrays this idea by “giving musical expression to this new beginning in life in the form of a lullaby.”<sup>120</sup> The work concludes with this lullaby. Vasks once again writes for voice and cello accompaniment, as he did in *Grāmata čellam*. The accompaniment also includes a single violin.

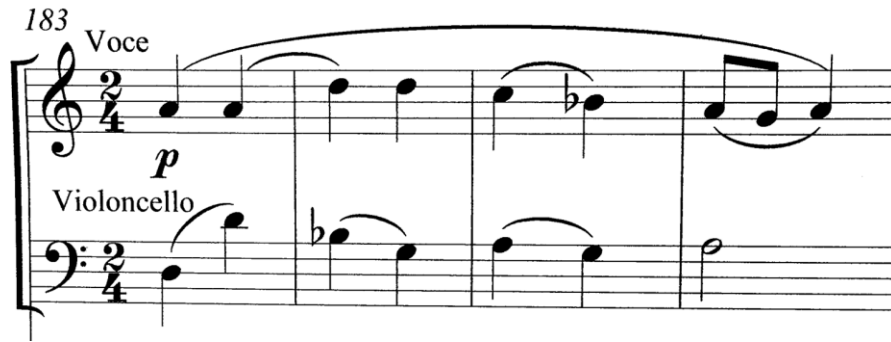


Figure 5.6: mm. 183 – 186. The *Adagio* ‘Lullaby’ voice and cello scoring

Gabetta had specifically asked Vasks to incorporate voice into the concerto, and of the vocal lullaby she remarks:

When it is combined with the cello, the vocal line introduces an element of polyphony into the piece that you otherwise don’t get with this solo instrument on its own. It opens up a new dimension for the listener. I find this absolutely fascinating.<sup>121</sup>

The use of the voice in the closing lullaby is highly atmospheric. It should be noted, however, that Vasks presents an alternate option if the cellist does not wish to sing. An obvious reason to choose not to sing would be the register in which it is written, similarly to the vocal line in *Grāmata čellam*. The vocal line reaches a high F, a pitch that is difficult,

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

<sup>121</sup> Sol Gabetta. *Presence*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

especially for male cellists. Vasks includes an *ossia* in the score where the cellist can play the vocal line using artificial harmonics.



Figure 5.7: mm 183 – 186 Ossia – Artificial Harmonics alternate option to voice

When taking this option in performance, the accompaniment is altered requiring a single cello from the orchestra to play the scored cello line. Previously mentioned cellists who have performed this work have altered the lullaby. Li-Wei Qin chose to sing although he sang the passage down the octave but Vasks expressed disappointment with the results. This led to Vasks' suggestion to have a member of the string orchestra sing the vocal line if the soloist is unable to do so at the written pitch. Marko Ylönen made the artistic decision to have a member of the orchestra play the vocal line on the violin, as the cellist did not wish to attempt the singing.

The completed work “radiates a special emotional depth and a fascinatingly earthy force.”<sup>122</sup> The music in the concerto has an autobiographical feel, like a “life lived through the cello,”<sup>123</sup> even without being a reproduction of Vasks' life. The composer explains his idea of what is to happen: “You return to the cosmos, but everything goes on and new life comes to the earth in vocal form.”<sup>124</sup> The conclusion of the work particularly radiates the previously mentioned idea of “the soul ascending into the cosmos.”<sup>125</sup> This is reflected

<sup>122</sup> Sol Gabetta. *Presence*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

<sup>123</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.



with a free trill in the solo cello line, which ascends on the A string over the final six measures, accompanied by slow moving sustained chords in the orchestra. The score does not print the specific indication that the solo cello is to trill but the squiggly line printed has been interpreted, as can be heard in recordings, as a free ascending trill.

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The top system features a solo cello line with a squiggly line indicating a free ascending trill, accompanied by a piano line with sustained chords. The bottom system shows the full orchestra (tutti) with various instruments playing sustained chords and moving lines, marked with dynamics like *pp* and *ppp*.

Figure 5.8: mm. 208 – 213. “The soul ascending into the cosmos”<sup>126</sup>

The cello continues its ascent whilst the orchestra comes to rest on a D-major chord. This final chord suggests contentedness and peace. The concerto comes to rest after all

<sup>126</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

manner of chaos and emotions, figuratively on a positive note, portraying Vasks' ideas of life, love for the world and hope for a better world.

The majority of the technically demanding material for the cellist performing *Klātbūtne* can be found in the two cadenzas. The cadenzas contain obscure passages of multi-stopped chords. These passages often contain inconsistencies in the chord progressions, calling upon creative fingerings in order for the performer to be able to shift and sustain stopped notes surrounded by moving material.

An example of this can be found in the opening cadenza:



Figure 5.9: Cadenza I – Unconventional left hand fingering

The main hurdle of this phrase is being able to sustain the 'A' whilst playing the moving line below, with the fifth occurring during this figure. The obvious fingering options, allowing for the 'A' to be sustained, include shifting to the A-E fourth on, option A: 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> finger or, option B: 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> finger. Both options allow for the consistent descent of the other fingers; however, the left hand may need to be somewhat distorted to achieve this. Another option would be to use overlapping fingers to produce the fifth. Using a consistent second finger on the A and then using 3<sup>rd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> – thumb on the D string, for the moving notes, would be more *legato* than the previously mentioned fingerings.

The final phrase of the first cadenza contains a challenging figure from the *fortissimo*.



Figure 5.10: Cadenza I – Unconventional shifting

An initial difficulty in this passage is being able to shift from the C-E third to C-F# augmented fourth; the C-F# being a mere semitone across the A and D string, plus at the high register, require strength and weight. The interval does not allow for a chunky thumb. A 2-1 fingering would be more practical, however, potentially does not provide the same strength as the thumb.

The other difficulty of this passage is the quick string crossings for the left hand fingers between the C-E third and B-G sixth. The source of the challenge again is the fifth across the string, C-G. In a lower register this would be simpler but at the register written a great deal of precision is required from the left hand. This also requires a lot of strength as the string has a greater distance to the fingerboard and precision is required for accurate intonation.

Another example of Vasks' writing that includes the cross-string fifth appears in the second phrase of the second cadenza:



Figure 5.11: Cadenza II – Unconventional thumb position

There are numerous fingerings possible for executing this cross-string fifth: E-flat-B-flat. Most options include consecutive fingers overlapping to produce the fifth or else a variety of acrobatics to stop the fifth with one finger. An alternate option is to use the thumb to play both the D and E-flat, while using the first finger to play the B-flat. The only movement required with this option is the flexing of the thumb joint up a semitone on the D string from the D to the E-flat.

The second movement contains a multitude of other difficulties. It is possible that these seem demanding only because of the fast tempo of the movement, with quick moving chord progressions and hasty strings crossings.

Whilst this work requires a high level of technical skill, the greatest challenge is creating and telling the story that Vasks has written amongst the notes on the page. The atmosphere and emotional material that Vasks has poured into the outer movements and intertwined amongst the *Allegro marcato* is the most challenging aspect to sustain. To perform the work maintaining intensity and preserving the purity of the musical material is more defying than the chaotic passages surrounded by this love.

The only recording of *Klātbūtne* that has been officially released is Sol Gabetta's recording from 2015 for Sony Music. Vasks worked closely with Gabetta to produce this recording and therefore it is considered as closely accurate to the composer's intentions as possible. It should be noted, though, that sometimes the details that were changed in the recording process might not have transferred to the published score. I have used Gabetta's recording as a template for my own performance and guide to interpreting the score.

For the purpose of this exegesis other recordings, all live performances, were obtained. This includes Li-Wei Qin's performance on April 1, 2014 at the Adelaide International

Cello Festival with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and Marko Ylönen's performance on September 12, 2015 at the Cello Cesis with Sinfonietta Riga. Multiple live recordings of Gabetta performing the concerto were also used.

In addition to the three cello works that have been discussed, *Grāmata čellam*, Cello Concerto and *Klātbūtne*, Vasks also composed two smaller scale and not as well-known works for cello: Partita and *Musique du Soir*.

## Chapter 6

### Other works for violoncello

#### 6.1 Partita for violoncello and piano (1974)

Vasks' earliest composition for violoncello was his Partita for violoncello and piano. It was composed in 1974 during the time he studied composition in Valentin Utkin's class at the Latvian Music Academy. Although cellist Zsolt Molnar and pianist Anatol Jagoda premiered Partita on July 30, 1975, it was subsequently revised in 2001. The new version was commissioned by the German city of Heidelberg for the Heidelberg Spring, an international music festival, published by Schott, and premiered by cellist Alban Gerhardt and pianist Markus Groh on March 24, 2001.

The Partita appears in four movements and uses an array of rhythmic elements as the basis for each movement. The first movement, *Preludio (Andante)*, is a haunting dance. The second movement, an *Aria (Adagio)*, leads to a "passionate outbreak with a melancholy swan song [sic]"<sup>127</sup> before the third movement *Toccata (Allegretto)* appears similarly to a trio. Whilst the *Toccata* is dynamic and powerful it also includes a supple interlude. *Postludio*, the final movement, reminiscences over previous material from the work; however, it leaves the work open ended, as it does not draw any real conclusions, lacking in harmonic closure and any sort of melodic resolution.

The cellist David Geringas and pianist Kalle Randalu recorded the work in 2008. Once again, Geringas' close relationship with Vasks as well as familiarity with the composer's works provides us with a well-informed recording.

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<sup>127</sup> Peter T. Köster. *Pēteris Vasks: Grāmata čellam / Partita / Episodi e canto perpetuo*. Translated by Miguel Carazo. (Stuttgart: SWR Classic, 2008) CD Liner Notes.

## 6.2 *Musique du Soir*

*Musique du Soir*, translating to mean ‘music of the evening,’ was originally composed for hunting horn and organ. The work was completed in the late 1980s for a Latvian music festival, during the Cold War period prior to Latvian independence. Unhappy with the original instrumentation, Vasks wrote a version of *Musique du Soir* for violoncello and organ, commissioned by The Usedom Music Festival. Vasks prefers this version, which exploits the contrast between the organ and its objective sound and the subjective personal cello cantilena.<sup>128</sup> In a single movement, *Musique du Soir* creates an atmosphere similar to the final *Adagio* of *Klātbūtne*, revealing “an incredible tension in the way in which it alternates between the organ and the cello.”<sup>129</sup> Gabetta released a recording of *Musique du Soir* alongside *Klātbūtne*, commenting on the instrumentation that: “with its polyphony, the organ brings a whole new dimension to the sound world for this release, something that I find altogether delightful.”<sup>130</sup> Vasks writes an expressive singing line for the cello above the gradual moving harmonies led by the organ.

Vasks refers to his compositions as if they were his ‘children.’ His works are named with unique programmatic titles, like *Musique du Soir*, *Grāmata čellam* and *Klātbūtne*. Of the title *Musique du Soir*, Vasks is referring to two different aspects of the evening. He says: “on the one hand, the evening after a long and fulfilling day and, on the other hand, the evening of our life.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 7

### Comparison of Compositions

Vasks' compositions for violoncello span almost four decades. Whilst his writing for the instrument has developed over time, some characteristics and musical material remain common throughout all works. A recurring violent passage (*fortissimo double stops*) can be found in all Vasks' cello works, excluding *Musique du Soir*. This generally appears at moments of great drama with these passages almost always marked *fortissimo*. The composer initially created this idea in his Partita at moments of intensification. The following passage is from the first movement *Preludio*:



Figure 7.1: mm. 43 – 45. *Preludio* from Partita<sup>132</sup>

This passage is the climax of the movement marked *con durezza* and *fortissimo*, the loudest material in the movement. Vasks writes double stops with the rhythm alternating between quavers and semiquavers. A passage appears at the end of the third movement, *Toccata*, containing double stops with a similar rhythmic idea. It is once again marked *fortissimo* and is the only extended passage in this movement with this marking, even though the *Toccata* throughout is a fast, chaotic and loud movement.

<sup>132</sup> This and all other subsequent examples from Partita are taken from: Pēteris Vasks. *Partita for violoncello and piano*. (Mainz: Schott Music, 2002).





Figure 7.2: mm. 125 – 129. *Toccata* from Partita

The only other time that *fortissimo* is reached in this movement is for one bar that is also reminiscent of these passages. Here, however, the notes do not change which is more like Vasks' use of this idea in his subsequent cello works.



Figure 7.3: mm. 78. *Toccata* from Partita

Vasks goes on to use this rhythmic idea as the main thematic material for the first movement *Fortissimo* in *Grāmata čellam*. When this figure appears, in this work, the repeated notes are always the same without any alternation in pitch, always appearing as a double stopped major seventh, excluding the opening statement of this theme.



Figure 7.4: *Grāmata čellam* – Main thematic material from *Fortissimo*

Figures like this one, as previously discussed in Chapter 3, appear throughout the movement with the rhythm alternating between crotchets and semiquavers.

In Vasks' first cello concerto a similar figure appears. In the third cadenza he writes the same major seventh chord with an alternating rhythm reminiscent to that of *Grāmata čellam*. The motif is preceded by one of the composer's trademark double stopped slides.



Figure 7.5: Cello Concerto – Opening of Cadenza III

Finally, in the second cello concerto *Klātbūtne*, Vasks utilises this passage at the end of the second movement. It appears at the end of the solo cello part before the *Presto tutti* passage, which concludes the movement. The passage is marked *fortississimo* using all other typical characteristics of like passages.

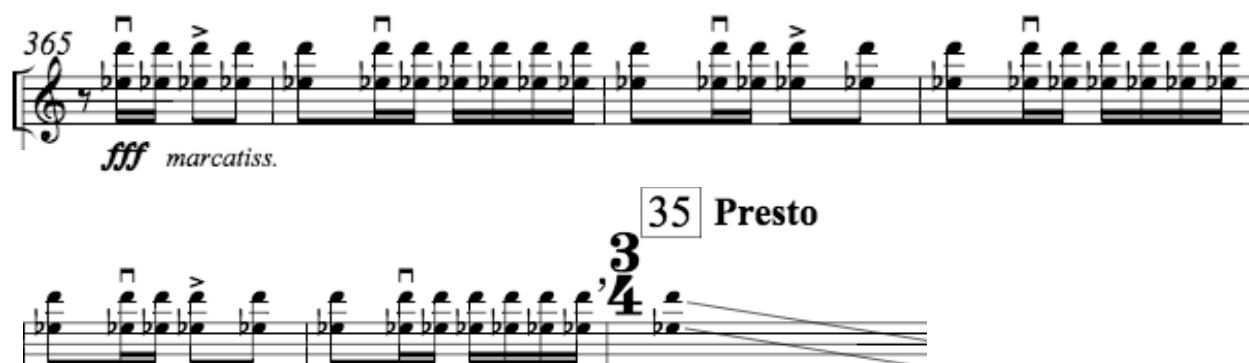


Figure 7.6: mm. 365 – 372. *Klātbūtne* – Conclusion of solo cello line from second movement

This recurring violent passage is perhaps the most recognisable in all Vasks' compositions for cello. It should also be noted that Vasks' slow movement writing has vastly developed and changed over time. Whilst his *Pianissimo* from *Grāmata čellam* is highly atmospheric, his *Andante* and *Adagio's* in *Klātbūtne* are possibly the most beautiful and soul-searching writing he has accomplished for the cello. He uses long melodic lines and utilises the orchestra greatly in support.

## Chapter 8

### Performance of Vasks' violoncello works

During the course of my candidature I performed Vasks' Partita for violoncello and piano and his second cello concerto, *Klātbūtne*. These two works were composed almost four decades apart with Partita composed in 1974 and *Klātbūtne* in 2012, therefore at opposite ends of the spectrum. The progression and development of Vasks' style and writing can be observed clearly through research-aided performance practice, even though the works are of two greatly differing scales. Research also played a large role in assisting with the interpretation of both pieces, as I continually strived for an accurate and well-informed performance.

Vasks' explanation for his programmatic title *Klātbūtne* is: "I am here. I am not distant. With every breath I am here in this world, with all my ideals and all my dreams of a better world."<sup>133</sup> The whole concerto is like a "life lived through the cello."<sup>134</sup> If only we always had a few lines from the composer about what he or she was thinking and intending for all music that we are required to perform throughout our life. I always kept Vasks' words in mind when studying and performing this work, eager to decipher what phase of life Vasks was trying to convey. Initially, I anticipated that all musical material would eventually make sense in one way or another and come to life, even when I was struggling to technically master difficult passages. It is often very clear what the composer's idea was. However, I still spent extended periods of time staring at, playing and singing

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<sup>133</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

<sup>134</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

musical material from this work, and for a while I was confused about what Vasks intended of the notes on the page in front of me.

The majority of challenging material in this concerto lies in the two extensive cadenzas.

The first cadenza that begins the work poses as a real challenge, as the cello begins with

the *pianississimo-col legno* C string motif. To immediately be ‘present,’ as the title

*Klātbūtne* suggests, and to create an atmosphere that will engage and capture an audience

is perhaps one of the greatest challenges of this work. This passage is not technically

difficult, but as the performer I knew I had to believe in and nourish every note. I wanted

the opening to sound like something spectacular had begun and strived to convey this

with absolute intention. Initially I saw this as a great challenge, with the opening

requiring such a tender dynamic. Most cello concertos in the standard repertoire burst

into life instantly from the very beginning with grandiose chords, a beautiful melody or an

orchestral *tutti* that sets the scene for the solo instrument. There are a few exceptions

such as Lutosławski’s cello concerto, which begins with an extensive quasi-cadenza by the

solo cello, in a soft dynamic. I was concerned, however, that the Vasks’ concerto opening

could sound like an accident or even like the double-checking of orchestral tuning.

When initially studying the beginning of the concerto it was unclear to me what Vasks’

was portraying here. I could see the development in the cadenza as it progressed but I

was initially unsure why such a large-scale work would begin on a manner so

understated. Through research I finally found my answer: “You set foot in the world with

a task to perform.”<sup>135</sup> These words gave me the clarification I needed, and I interpreted

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<sup>135</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.

them to mean that the opening was meant to express gentle, uncertain footsteps on foreign ground.

The cadenzas are so extensive and technically challenging that I often struggled to put the music first. Rather, I found myself obsessing and striving to technically master the challenging material. When first studying these cadenzas I initially went through all the typical motions of learning something new. I came up with fingerings that called for great creativity, still ensuring they were practical. I did slow practice to accurately execute shifts, maintain good intonation and quick ways to distort the left hand when necessary. I found myself, however, quickly falling into the trap of forgetting about the musical intent and found myself treating this incredible mastery of composition like some sort of mathematics equation rather than a work of art.

Throughout the process of learning the concerto I always had to refer back to Vasks' words that this concerto is intended as a "life story." The outer movements, *Andante cantabile* and *Adagio*, were easier to decipher. Being less demanding, the writing in these movements made it simpler to find the beauty and love that Vasks incorporates in them. The decisions I had to make were based around the tone and colour, such as whether to play passages in higher positions on the D string to create warmth and when to utilise the brightness of the A string. The ever-present themes that Vasks speaks of in his work were all laid out and his sensitive writing for string orchestra supports the solo cello throughout these movements.

The highly contrasting second movement, *Allegro marcato*, is where I once again faced challenges. This movement is fuelled by negative, sarcastic-sounding ideas and combined with Vasks' use of speed and repetition. I found myself trying to find scenarios amongst the musical material to which I could relate. I decided that the *Allegro marcato* movement

is all about the challenges we face in life: arguments and frustration, struggles and hardship. The chaotic activity is broken twice in this movement by delicate *Andante* interludes: moments of sadness, heartbreak and loss. The *Andantes* appear suddenly amongst the chaos requiring a quick adaptation to the contrast, which is a reflection on how throughout life, often without warning, sudden unexpected events occur that we are not prepared for and we have to find ways to adapt.

The instruction to sing and play at the same time was another difficulty. Both cello and vocal lines are not particularly challenging and I knew I could do it quite comfortably in the privacy of my practice room. However, I found myself battling with self-doubt and a string of 'what-if's,' engulfed in thoughts of: What if the first note does not sound when I sing? What if nerves get the better of me? With the voice required only at the very end of the work, already having performed for some 30 minutes, I was concerned about being thirsty and needing to warm up my voice. For the weeks leading up to the performance I consciously tried to take great care of my voice. I was intensely drinking lemon and honey drinks and I had rationed all stimulants. I also practiced performing the piece numerous times from beginning to end so I could assess how to approach the singing. My plan of attack was to try clearing my throat and warm it up by humming quietly during the last *fortissimo* passage before the lullaby. These were perhaps a lot of unnecessary precautions, I do not know. In my performance the first sung note did sound when it was supposed to, much to my surprise, and I was very happy with the result of the lullaby.

I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to perform *Klātbūtne* with the Jan Sedivka Camerata, conducted by Dr Susan Collins. The inclusion of the string orchestra brings the work to life, even when the orchestration is sparse, creating the highly unique 'Vasks' atmosphere and something that could not be accomplished with an orchestral reduction.

The greatest challenge with orchestra was making sure all Vasks' contrasts of colour and dynamic were executed, as well as making sure the solo cello line was always present. The orchestra put in a great effort for my performance and it was a fantastic experience for me to have their support and participation.

Perhaps my favourite moment in the whole work is the final six measures, previously highlighted in Chapter 5: the final motion and idea of "ascending into the cosmos,"<sup>136</sup> marked *poco a poco niente*. Vasks' scoring of the orchestra with the slow moving sustained chords and the solo cello sounding above them with its ascending trill could not better portray his idea. The concerto contains such a vast array of characters and emotions and the conclusion of the work draws all of it together with what I believe is a "happy ending."

After studying *Klātbūtne*, Vasks' Partita was significantly simpler to approach. Having spent an extensive amount of time working on the concerto made it easier to understand Vasks' musical language. I was also much more comfortable, or perhaps used to, tackling the technically challenging material that Vasks writes.

The beginning of the work was once again a challenge. It begins with a low *pizzicato* passage in conversation with the piano. The low register of both instruments made it difficult to hear and in recital the piano was almost inaudible from my position. The main *forte* theme of the first movement, *Preludio*, is once again very reminiscent of Shostakovich's composition style. The harsh fast-paced moments throughout the work are very similar to the second movement of Shostakovich's Cello Sonata.

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<sup>136</sup> Sibylle and Burkhard Schäfer. *Presence: Music as a psychodrama*. Translated by texthouse. (Germany: Sony, 2015) CD Liner Notes.



Another passage of particular difficulty was Vasks' *col legno* writing in the third movement, *Toccata*. The sheer speed of the semiquavers written amongst quavers that required constant string crossings was challenging to control and produce a satisfactory quality of sound. I found it helpful to think of my bow use as more vertical rather than horizontal, hence focusing less on the up and down bows. The fast running semiquavers of the *Toccata* were also challenging, as often they seemed to just be rumbling low notes with little significance and direction. Passages of this sort often begin in the cello's lowest register, where it is often difficult to maintain clarity.

I believe the real beauty of the Partita lies in the *Aria*. The melody is written in a comfortable and beautiful register for the cello and is a clear example of Vasks' slow movement writing in the making, similar to that of the outer movement of *Klātbūtne*. The *Aria* especially contains great examples of Vasks' use of sudden contrasts. This calls for quick thinking to adjust to changing tempo and character. I find it very exciting working to achieve this though. Whilst within each movement sudden contrasts occur, as a whole work consisting of these four short movements, each is still filled with a highly contrasting character, the composer displaying a differing style of writing in each movement. The Partita was surprisingly quite easy to piece together with piano, the thematic material shared between the two players as would be expected in a sonata.

Throughout my researched-based performance practice of the music of Vasks I have constantly been developing a greater awareness of his style of writing and the raw emotions with which he fills his music. A great concern throughout this experience has been how Vasks' works are not always easily accessible for all audiences. I feared that some musical material could potentially be difficult for an audience to interpret and relate to, especially the violent aggressiveness of Vasks' fast movements. I tried to convey the

style of the music as much as I could, striving to make the music accessible and enhance recognisable elements for the audience. Ultimately, however, my primary goal was to perform each work with utter conviction and to constantly embrace the style of Vasks' music.

## Chapter 9

### Conclusion

Pēteris Vasks' compositions for violoncello have contributed greatly to the cello repertoire of today. His three key cello works *Grāmata čellam*, Cello Concerto and *Klātbūtne* can now be heard in concert halls all around the world. Partita for violoncello and piano and *Musique du Soir* for violoncello and organ also serve as stepping-stones exhibiting how Vasks' compositions have developed over time and how his writing for the cello has matured. His cello writing spans over four decades allowing us to observe how his own unique musical style has emerged as well as how time has affected and altered his focused subject matter. This is displayed by the progression of his mastering of extremely technical writing for the instrument, allowing him to draw new possibilities from the instrument.

The hardships the Latvian composer endured as a result of living through the Soviet occupation vastly influenced his music. The pain and suffering of his country and its people is a predominant theme portrayed, ever-present in his aggressive and violent-sounding musical textures. Equally the joys of independence, love for his country, life and the world are engulfed in Vasks' luscious and poetic melodies.

The greatest stylistic trait that Vasks utilises and characterises in his compositions is that of extreme contrasts: black to white, dark to light. This highly powerful compositional technique is exploited initially in *Grāmata čellam*, with the titles of the movements blatantly highlighting the contrasts. Vasks' sharp juxtapositions make the opposite ends of the spectrum that much stronger and places a great responsibility in the hands of the performer to express.

Stylistic and technical directions can be found within the extensive cadenzas in the works. *Grāmata čellam* initially gives us a taste of the two intrepid contrasts for the solo cello, which is then explored further by Vasks in his concerti cadenzas. Climaxes of great intensity and volume are refined in these cadenzas with a stronger focus on the moving melody. Whereas *Grāmata čellam's Fortissimo* can sometimes be heard as more chaotic than refined by characters, the extreme possibilities that Vasks primarily explores in the solo work are very apparent in the cadenzas, having drawn material out of this early work.

Vasks' compositional style owes very little to any of his predecessors. Compositions by Polish avant-garde composers such as Lutosławski and Penderecki contributed to Vasks' development. He was greatly influenced by the aleatoric compositional techniques similarly used by these composers, amongst others. Vasks' cello works also often contain an uncanny resemblance to that of Shostakovich's; however, as evidenced in this analysis we can see that he has created his very own unique compositional style.

Vasks is one of the greatest composers of his generation. Through his mature compositional style, listeners can hear the pure emotions and the recurring theme of the delicate relationship between humans and nature. Whilst elements of pain and misfortune are often present, Vasks' distinct and unique compositional style always allows for his love of life to shine strongest.

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## Appendix

### Performance Folio

#### Performance I – 22 August 2015

**Sergei Prokofiev (1891 – 1953)**

**Sonata in C major for violoncello and piano, Op.119 (1949)**

- i. Andante grave
- ii. Moderato
- iii. Allegro, ma non troppo

**Dmitri Kabalevsky (1904 – 1987)**

**Cello Concerto No.1 in G minor, Op.49 (1948/49)**

- i. Allegro
- ii. Largo, molto espressivo
- iii. Allegretto

Associate Artist – Karen Smithies, Piano

### Programme Notes:

**Sergei Prokofiev (1891 – 1953)**

**Sonata in C major for violoncello and piano, Op.119 (1949)**

After almost 15 years living in Paris and travelling the world, Prokofiev longed to return to his homeland of Russia. In 1936, along with his wife and two sons, he relocated to Russia. Prokofiev strived to establish himself as one of Russia's greatest composers, as the other notable Russian composers of his time had already established themselves abroad. Stravinsky was known throughout Europe, Rachmaninoff in America and Shostakovich was restricted by Stalin's regime.

Andrey Zhdanov, the Soviet cultural policy maker, passed a series of decrees, at this time in an attempt to recover the Soviet "socialist realism" ideal of art. These policies affected art, film, literature and lastly music, in 1948. Zhdanov condemned Prokofiev, along with Shostakovich, Khatchaturian and Miaskovsky, for composing music that was "too cosmopolitan and formalist." This resulted with an unofficial ban on the music of these composers. This decree prevented artistic growth throughout Russia and for the

remainder of Prokofiev's life. An abundance of the composer's work was banned from public performance. Whilst Prokofiev continued to compose, his life in Moscow was not what he had anticipated for the remainder of his life.

Prokofiev's *Sonata for cello and piano* is a result of his friendship with the cellist Mstislav "Slava" Rostropovich. In 1947 the composer met Slava, a 20-year-old student at the time, after hearing him play his Cello Concerto. Prokofiev went on to rework the Concerto, which became his *Sinfonia Concertante for Cello and Orchestra*, especially for Slava. It is evident that the *Sonata* was a clear collaboration of the two men.

Prokofiev and Rostropovich spent much time together exploring the possibilities of the cello and its technical virtuosity. Prokofiev inscribed the first page of the Sonata's manuscript with a line by Maxim Gorky, a Soviet writer: "Man – that has a proud sound." These words are intended as a tribute to Slava's phenomenal musicianship.

Slava and the pianist Sviatoslav Richter initially performed the Sonata privately to the Soviet Union of Composers and the Radio Committee. It was then premiered publicly at the Moscow Conservatory on 1 March, 1950. Unfortunately due to illness Prokofiev was unable to attend.

The Sonata has Prokofiev's creative personality throughout with his use of classical and lyrical elements. The three-movement work is laid out in traditional forms: sonata, scherzo and trio, and a rondo. A grave cello solo, in the instruments lowest register, begins the first movement, followed by a highly lyrical second theme. The thematic material reappears in the recapitulation with the movement concluding with a virtuosic coda. The second movement contains qualities of child's play, teasing and sticking-out-of-tongues. The outer sections are separated by a highly contrasting lyrical waltz with the main melody being in the cello. The final movement contains a folksong infused refrain in the form of a rondo, which appears throughout the course of this movement. The concluding coda revisits the opening theme from the first movement.

**Dmitri Kabalevsky (1904 – 1987)** <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

### **Cello Concerto No.1 in G minor, Op.49 (1948/49)**

Kabalevsky was the son of a mathematician and it was always hoped by his family that he would follow in the footsteps of his father's vocation. The Russian always displayed great artistic talent from painting to piano. He was born in St Petersburg and relocated, with his family, to Moscow after the Bolshevik Revolution. Here he studied painting and piano at the Scriabin Musical Institute. With his interests firmly focused in the arts, he rejected his father's wishes for him to study at the Engels Socio-Economic Science Institute in 1922 and instead continued his music studies and began to compose. In 1925 he began studying at the Moscow Conservatory, studying composition with Miaskovsky. Kabalevsky also became known for his written articles that appeared in the Association of Contemporary Music Journal.

Kabalevsky's first Cello Concerto, in G minor, was composed in the years 1948 and 1949. The composer dedicated a great deal of his life to writing music for young Russian musicians. This concerto is the second of three concertos he wrote with this intention. The first work in the trilogy is his Violin Concerto in C major, op.48, and the final work is his Piano Concerto No.3 in D major, op.50. Svyatoslav Knushevitsky premiered Kabalevsky's first Cello Concerto in 1949, to whom the work is also dedicated. Knushevitsky performed the work with a student orchestra from the Moscow Conservatory. This work, along with the other two works in the trilogy, were received with an abundance of praise.

The opening movement, *Allegro*, has a march-like feel created by pizzicato strings to begin. The solo cello enters over this with a salient theme. It is a theme of melodic tension containing a lyrical melodic release as the register of the cello ascends. Kabalevsky dedicated the second movement *Largo* to the fallen Russian soldiers. He used a Russian folksong as the basis of the melody. The cello plays the melancholic theme in a series of stanzas. The final *Allegro Molto* consists of variations on a theme based on another Russian folksong. This melody is quickly developed becoming faster and more agitated. The cello becomes more virtuosic than the earlier movements and the work concludes in a flurry.

## **Performance II – 13 May 2016**

**Pēteris Vasks (1946 – )**

***Klātbūtne* – Presence**

**Concerto No. 2 for violoncello and string orchestra (2012)**

- i. Cadenza – Andante cantabile
- ii. Allegro marcato
- iii. Adagio <sup>[11]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

Associate Artists – Jan Sedivka Camerata, Conducted by Dr Susan Collins

## Performance III – 22 November 2016

**Pēteris Vasks (1946 – )**

### **Partita for violoncello and piano (1974)**

- i. Preludio: Andante
- ii. Aria: Adagio -
- iii. Toccata: Allegretto
- iv. Postludio

**Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 – 1945)**

### **Sonata in G minor for violoncello and piano, Op. 19 (1901)**

- i. Lento – Allegro Moderato
- ii. Allegro scherzando
- iii. Andante
- iv. Allegro mosso

Associate Artist – Caroline Almonte, Piano

## **Programme Notes:**

**Pēteris Vasks (1946 – )** 

### **Partita for violoncello and piano (1974)**

Partita for violoncello and piano is Vasks' first composition for 'cello, composed in 1974. It was written while Vasks was studying composition at the Latvian Music Academy in the class of Valentin Utkin. The Partita was premiered by cellist Zsolt Molnar and pianist Anatol Jagoda on July 30, 1975.

Vasks revised the work in 2001 and it was first published the following year. The work was commissioned by the German city of Heidelberg for the Heidelberg Spring, an international music festival, where German cellist Alban Gerhardt and pianist Markus Groh premiered the revised work on March 24, 2001.

The Partita appears in four-movements and contains an array of rhythmic elements. The first movement, *Preludio: Andante*, is a haunting dance. The second movement, an *Aria: Adagio*, leads to a "passionate outbreak with a melancholy swan song" before the third movement, *Toccata: Allegretto*, functions like a trio in the overall structure of the work. While the *Toccata* is dynamic and powerful, it also includes a supple interlude. The final

movement, *Postludio* -revisits material from earlier in the work, particularly from the first movement *Preludio*. The work concludes leaving the listener with a sense of ambiguity.

### **Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 – 1945)**

#### **Sonata in G minor for violoncello and piano, Op.19 (1901)**

Rachmaninoff's Sonata in G minor for violoncello and piano was his last chamber work. At the turn of the century, the Russian composer was going through a crisis of self-confidence, following the disastrous premiere of his first Symphony in 1897. He was unable to compose for the following years, until he eventually began hypnotherapy, which helped conquer his problem. Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto, which he began composing in 1900, was his first composition following his recovery. The composer dedicated this work to his physician, Nikolai Dahl, who helped restore the composer's self-confidence. The G minor sonata was another of Rachmaninoff's first key works after his recovery, completed November 1901. He dedicated the work to the Russian cellist and very close friend, Anatoliy Brandukov, who premiered the work with Rachmaninoff at the piano.

The four-movement work is filled with characters typical of Russia's Romantic period. It has been said that the work is like the composer himself: "big, robust and moody whilst poised between the heart-on-the-sleeve Romanticism of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century and the edgier, more emotionally introverted idiom of the post-Romantic era." The Sonata is, at heart, an exhilaratingly joyful work. The two epic outer movements contain drama-filled allegros with grandiose melodies and lush textures. This is contrasted by a more introspective mood of the central movements, *Allegro scherzando* and *Andante*, the latter containing some of Rachmaninoff's most sensitive and lyrical music. The interplay between the two instruments in this movement is perfectly balanced; elsewhere in the sonata the piano is favoured. Full of energy and beautiful melodies typical of Rachmaninoff's writing, the G minor cello sonata, is one of his best chamber works.

## Performance IV – 26 August 2017

### Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 – 1975)

#### Sonata in D minor for violoncello and piano, Op. 40 (1934)

- i. Allegro non troppo
- ii. Allegro
- iii. Largo
- iv. Allegro

Shostakovich composed this Sonata in 1934 not long before the Soviet authorities began criticising much of his music. This was also a time of emotional turmoil for Shostakovich as he had fallen in love with Yelena Konstaninovskaya, a young translator, much to the dismay of his wife Nina. The affair resulted with Shostakovich divorcing Nina for a short period of time, which is when he composed this sonata. He premiered with and dedicated the work to his close friend and cellist Viktor Kubatsky. The following year Shostakovich remarried Nina as she was pregnant with his daughter.

The first movement, *Allegro non troppo*, opens the sonata with an elegant theme. Similar to Shostakovich's string quartets the music quickly becomes dark and very dramatic. The second movement is an unpredictable scherzo. It begins with a repetitive motif in the cello accompanying the piano, which introduces the melody. The roles and musical material is quickly swapped between the instruments with the cello now taking off with the melody.

The *Largo* is a solemn lament serving as the emotional core of this work. It is very dark with searching melodic lines in the cello, accompanied by pulsing rhythms in the piano. A few passages suggest of warmth but there is little solace to be found.

The finale contains a blend of many typical elements of Shostakovich. It begins with a cheeky, playful theme that can be heard numerous times throughout the movement by both instruments. The movement also contains passages of energetic arpeggios and scales, a soaring second theme and a grotesque march before the movement ends abruptly.

### Pēteris Vasks (1946 – )

#### *Klātbūtne* – Presence

#### Concerto No. 2 for violoncello and string orchestra (2012)

- i. Cadenza – Andante cantabile
- ii. Allegro marcato
- iii. Adagio <sup>[...]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>

Vasks composed *Klātbūtne*, his second cello concerto for violoncello and string orchestra in 2012. The work follows Vasks' long line of programmatic titles in Latvian: *Klātbūtne*



meaning 'Presence.' Vasks' explanation of the title is: "I am here. I am not distant. With every breath I am here in this world, with all my ideals and all my dreams of a better world."

*Klātbūtne* is a three-movement work. Vasks uses the cello in this work to convey his own view on life: "You arrive on this earth as a human being, you take your first steps in the world and then your life slowly develops."

The work opens with the first cadenza followed by the first movement – *Andante cantabile*. The cadenza grows from *col legno* to *pizzicato* and then *arco* allowing for the timbre and dynamic to increase gradually. This depicts Vasks' concept of one taking their "first steps in the world." This movement is reminiscent of a hymn, interpreted thus: "You set foot in the world with a task to perform, your aim being to bring more love and more idealism to the world." Vasks develops this idea throughout the first movement suggesting the development of life.

The second movement, *Allegro marcato*, is highly contrasting. The majority of Vasks' multi-movement works contain a strong contrast between movements, with the composer often employing the formal structure of slow – fast – slow. This movement is quick and aggressive, and fuelled by "negative ideas," through harsh dissonant passages.

The final movement, a slow *Adagio*, contains perhaps the most significant passage in the work. A recurring theme in Vasks' work is the tragedies of life and the conflict between nations and individuals. It is, however, present in this movement, serving as a key example, that Vasks' love, idealism and passion for life can still always be heard in his slow movements with his luscious, *legato* melodies. In this movement Vasks was "inspired to conjure up the idea of the soul returning to earth and starting a new life." He portrays this idea by giving musical expression to this new beginning in life in the form of a lullaby.